

CLASSIC *f*M HANDY GUIDES

# VIDEO GAME MUSIC

DANIEL ROSS

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# Introduction

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**A**t Classic FM, we spend a lot of our time dreaming up wonderful ways of making sure that as many people as possible across the UK have the opportunity to listen to classical music. As the nation's biggest classical music radio station, we feel that we have a responsibility to share the world's greatest music as widely as we can.

Over the years, we have written a variety of classical music books in all sorts of shapes and sizes. But we have never put together a series of books quite like this.

This set of books covers a whole range of aspects of classical music. They are all written in Classic FM's friendly, accessible style and you can rest assured that they are packed full of facts about classical music. Read separately, each book gives you a handy snapshot of a particular subject area. Added together, the series combines to offer a more detailed insight into the full story of classical music. Along the way, we shall be paying particular attention to some of the key composers whose music we play most often on the radio station, as well as examining many of classical music's subgenres.

These books are relatively small in size, so they are not going to be encyclopedic in the level of detail; there are other books out there that do that much better than we could ever hope to. Instead, they are intended to be enjoyable introductory guides that will be particularly useful to listeners who are beginning their voyage of discovery through the rich and exciting world of classical music. Drawing on the research we have undertaken for many of our previous Classic FM books, they concentrate on information rather than theory because we want to make this series of books attractive and inviting to readers who are not necessarily familiar with the more complex aspects of musicology.

For more information on this series, take a look at our website [www.ClassicFM.com/handyguides](http://www.ClassicFM.com/handyguides).

# Preface

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You'd be forgiven for thinking video game music is nothing more than a series of beeps designed to accompany pixelated images of Italian plumbers or electric-haired hedgehogs jumping around and collecting coins and rings for points. Alas, for Super Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog respectively, this was certainly the case in the early days. But since the late 1990s a sea change has occurred and the retro-sounding, eight-bit loops of music have become objects of nostalgia. Nowadays, the multi-billion-pound video game industry is responsible for commissioning enough orchestral scores to rival Hollywood, and its composers are increasingly treated with the same reverence. Some of today's top movie composers actually started their professional careers as composers for video games and countless new composers manage to operate in both mediums with terrific success.

Perhaps most notably, a massive, communal and international fan culture has emerged which ensures that enthusiasm for video game music remains at a constant fever pitch. Huge concert tours that focus on specific games series sell out huge auditoriums all over the world in mere hours (both the *Final Fantasy* and *The Legend of Zelda* franchises are a popular concert draw) and attendees display due reverence to composers and games alike by turning up in fancy dress and singing along with their favourite excerpts. Thanks to this atmosphere, which is truly unlike any other in the classical music world, video game music concerts look to be a safe bet in this time of wobbling ticket sales and budgetary constrictions.

If you require any greater verification of video game music's here-to-stay status, you need only look at the Classic FM Hall of Fame, the world's biggest annual classical music survey. In 2012, for the first time ever, two video game scores turned up in the all-important Top 300 – Nobuo Uematsu's *Final Fantasy* and Jeremy Soule's *The Elder Scrolls*. Then, in 2013, they went Top 5 – *Final Fantasy* climbed into the No. 3 position and *The Elder Scrolls* landed at No. 5, beating the mighty Beethoven down into No. 6 (and the resulting heated online debate about whether it counts as 'proper' classical music continue to this day). It's important not to underestimate this development, as it signals a massive shift. Video game music is no longer the preserve of the nerds – it's crossed over into the mainstream and is now a lucrative and continually growing area of music.

It hasn't always been like this, though. There really was a time when video game scores were confined to just a few different sounds per game. The limited memory space available restricted what any 'normal' composer would be able to achieve in terms of recording instruments and just about everything else that could make a piece of music more expressive

In this book, we're going to focus on the evolution of video game music as an orchestral format and how it became a firm fixture of the genre. As a result we'll be skipping over most of the more electronic and 'chiptune' scores, but it's worth briefly mentioning some of the early electronic innovators and their restrictions, as it was those restrictions that actually helped some of the more successful composers to become more inventive. Tellingly, it's those composers who have managed to survive the transition to full orchestral compositions.

But to start, we have to travel, perhaps inevitably, to Japan in the late 1970s and the world of arcade games ...

## From the Arcade to the Home

Imagine the noise of a video games arcade and you'll probably hear the electronic whoops, beeps and whistles of sound effects, and perhaps the occasional tune that signified the beginning of a new level. Genre classics such as *Pac-Man* (1980) had a recognisable theme composed by the game's sound director Toshio Kai, but examples like this were confined by the computer chips that held them – simply, the arcade machines couldn't cope with anything more complicated than a couple of sounds at a time. If a game developer wanted to include music in his magnum opus, it had to be programmed in, and not necessarily by anyone with any musical training. Unsurprisingly, the use of music was almost a millstone around the neck of your average game developer in the 1970s and 80s.

An early pioneer, though, was the iconic *Space Invaders*, made by Japanese gaming giant Taito in 1978. Game developer (note: not composer) **Tomohiro Nishikado** (born in 1948) was among the first to create a theme that could be heard while the game itself was being played. Well, perhaps 'theme' is a strong word. Essentially, the player would hear the same four notes repeated over and over, gradually becoming faster as the enemy swooped closer and closer to the player. What's crucial here, though, is that the music, such as it was, was audible *during* gameplay, not just between levels. Still, having only one melodic line to play with at a time was a huge restriction on what composers could do and it wasn't until later in the 1980s that the technology to use more than one note at a time developed.

In 1981, *Frogger* (made by Konami) contained several different themes for various points during the game and even changed to reflect the player's outcome (those of a certain age and with a misspent youth will remember the thrill of getting your frogs across the road and the subsequent change in musical theme). The composer of said themes is sadly anonymous, suggesting that again perhaps a slightly more musically minded developer is responsible. Other games, such as 1982's *Dig Dug* (a Namco classic), also contained multiple themes, some of them distinctly Baroque in sound, but there were still severe compositional restrictions thanks to the limitations of the sound technology available. Strangely enough, this stunted style of music has continued to have immense appeal to enthusiasts, and musicians still use 'chiptune', as it was eventually termed, in plenty of alternative pop and dance music today to inject a certain nostalgia into their recordings.

Things were, however, still a great distance from the orchestral scores that we've come

appreciate today. Major technical innovation would be required to allow the genre to grow which started with games moving out of the arcade and into the home.

## The Arrival of Consoles

When gaming moved out of the arcade and into the home thanks to consoles such as the Commodore 64 (released in 1982) and Nintendo's Famicom (released in 1983 and later become better known as the Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES), so the music capabilities of the machinery started to become a little more serious. Two names that have gone on to achieve legendary status in the video game music industry are **Koji Kondo** (born in 1961) and **Nobuo Uematsu** (born in 1959), thanks to their music composed for the *Super Mario Bros.* and *Final Fantasy* games franchises respectively.

Another leading light in the early days of video game music was **Koichi Sugiyama** (born in 1931), who composed the main themes for the popular role-playing game (known as RPGs in the business) *Dragon Quest I* in 1986. Sugiyama wore his classical influences on his sleeve and remarkably, his soundtrack became the first to be re-recorded by a full symphony orchestra with the London Philharmonic Orchestra playing on the 1986 CD release of the game's main themes. Of course, the sound in the original SNES (Super Nintendo Entertainment System) version was still limited by technology, but a seed had been planted. Indeed, Sugiyama's role in the birth of live video game music concerts was to eclipse his popularity as a composer in the story of the genre – but we'll come back to that later.

## Koji Kondo's Link to Greatness

Kondo's *Super Mario Bros.* theme from 1985 took advantage of the increased memory power of Nintendo's NES/Famicom and its not insubstantial five available channels of sound, and kicked off a game music revolution. That theme, with its bouncy, approachable feel, has become completely synonymous with the moustachioed Italian plumber it represents, exactly the same way that John Williams' theme for the movie version of *Superman* did with the eponymous tights-wearing superhero in the 1970s.

Kondo was also notable in that he was the first composer ever hired by the gaming giant at Nintendo, where he continues to work to this day – an investment that has seen him create many further *Super Mario* game scores into the new millennium. His main theme for *Super Mario Bros.* has been orchestrated and performed by countless orchestras in recent years ensuring that his compositions have made the full transition from chiptune to symphonic piece.

Another success for Kondo came with *The Legend of Zelda*. These games have a very speci

place in the industry. Another Nintendo title (Nintendo are the granddaddies of the gaming industry, having created such series as *Super Mario*, *Donkey Kong* and *Pokémon*), the *Zelda* franchise kicked off back in 1986 with its first game for the NES, subtitled *The Hyrule Fantasy*. Much of the gameplay focuses on the main character, a boy named Link, who spends the majority of his time roaming around a fantastical woodland landscape trying to locate and save the titular Princess Zelda. It's an immersive, story-led game in the RPG genre and the Nintendo team worked on it at the same time as it was putting the finishing touches to the first *Super Mario Bros.* game. As a result, it's almost the complete opposite of *Mario* – focusing on strong story elements and a slower rate of gameplay that championed puzzle-solving and emotional investment in the characters.

But despite this first game's legendary place in the industry thanks to all its technical and storytelling innovations, it's arguably Kondo's soundtrack that has stood the test of time most successfully. In its initial incarnation for the NES, the famous main theme is a folky, two-line melody in the familiar electronic sound of the console's limited musical voice. But it's beautifully, logically composed and, with the benefit of hindsight, it really does sound as if it could be scored for a full orchestra. Of course, that is eventually what happened as the video game music world became stronger and more inclined to revive older scores, but Kondo's original theme and several that occur throughout the early games in the series have very clear orchestral potential.

That main theme, though, almost didn't make it into the game. Kondo's original plan was to simply reduce and rescore French composer Maurice Ravel's epic orchestral masterpiece *Boléro* for the game's title screen, but at the crucial moment he discovered that the piece was still in copyright and, unless a hefty licensing fee could be found, he'd have to can the idea. So, with no little desperation, he supposedly composed the game's main theme in just one day. Whether that's true or not, it's yet more evidence that video game music composers were striving for that orchestral dimension, that sense of bombast and event that only orchestral scores can provide.

Kondo's *Zelda* music has since become the subject of many dedicated live performances and the later instalments in the series (perhaps most notably in 1998's *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*) rely heavily on music to trigger actual gameplay elements – learning and playing tunes in the game can unlock certain plot developments and secrets. But at the time of the early entries in the *Zelda* series – innovative though they were in terms of story, gameplay and music – greater interactivity and sophistication was still to come.

**Nobuo Uematsu – The Gamer's Richard Wagner?**

If composers such as Kondo and Sugiyama were among the first to take steps towards video game music being accepted as seriously as film soundtracks or even classical music itself, the man who grabbed the baton and sprinted for the finish line was Yoko Uematsu (a self-taught pianist, Elton John fan and music-shop employee) who composed his first *Final Fantasy* score in 1987 for game developers Square, and changed video game music for ever. The music still sounded lo-fi, the bleeps were still defiantly bleepy, but the music itself strived for the complexity and sensitivity of a full orchestral work.

Much like Richard Wagner did in his epic operas of the nineteenth century, Uematsu assigned different themes to different characters in the games, which themselves were almost Tolkienesque in their fantastical scope and range of characters. This kind of RPG marriage perfectly with Uematsu's symphonic leanings and a strange middle ground was struck between classical pastiche, classic Hollywood film scoring and those omnipresent chiptune sounds. Uematsu's career has, in many ways, been defined by his ongoing work on the *Final Fantasy* series (currently on its fourteenth instalment with several spin-offs besides), which has seen him finally realise his intentions of having his music played by a full symphonic orchestra in the games themselves.

## Games on CD

As small tweaks to home gaming continued to occur in the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the accompanying music and its composers carried on as they had been doing. The arrival of 16-bit consoles including the Sega Mega Drive and the SNES meant that music could become more elaborate and up to ten sounds could be heard at once – in stereo, no less. Game developers began to experiment with pre-recorded music as well as music composed especially for their games, and a prevailing taste for techno- and dance-influenced soundtracks began to take hold. Theme songs and vocals began to crop up as much as the more instrumental Uematsu and Sugiyama orchestral models. Increasingly, movie tie-in games would feature rearranged versions of their popular main themes, such as William Zemeckis' *Jurassic Park* and *Star Wars*.

A huge change, however, was on the horizon. The so-called 'fifth generation' of home video game consoles began using CDs as a common vehicle for games, rather than cartridges, which meant CD-quality sound. Arriving on the market in 1994, Sony's groundbreaking PlayStation could support a whopping twenty-four channels of sound. Recorded songs were now staples of gameplay, those film tie-in games were suddenly resplendent with the original symphonic recordings of their themes, and all was geared towards a bright, orchestral future. But one key ingredient was missing – the perfect game to hang a full-scale, movie-style

soundtrack on. Well, the missing ingredient turned up in 1997 – *Final Fantasy VII*.

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## **Nobuo Uematsu's Magnum Opus: *Final Fantasy VII***

Unsurprisingly, after quickly establishing himself as a major player in the world of video game music, Uematsu was at the forefront of the so-called fifth generation of home gaming consoles (Sony's PlayStation, Nintendo's N64 and Sega's Saturn). By 1997, the *Final Fantasy* series was up to its sixth entry. *Final Fantasy VII*, released originally for the Sony PlayStation, has given video game music fans some of the most recognisable moments in the genre, buoyed an entire industry of live concerts and firmly plonked itself near the business end of the Classic FM Hall of Fame. Interestingly, given the technology now available to Uematsu, he didn't opt for a costly, complex symphony orchestra when it came to composing *Final Fantasy VII*. Instead, he decided that pre-programmed MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface – basically more bleepy sounds) instruments would be enough, but he held on to that all-important orchestral scope.

More than any video game soundtrack before it, *Final Fantasy VII* embraced the notion that video game music should serve the same function as film music. And with this particular role playing game, it made perfect sense. The plot, which unfolds over something like forty hours of gameplay, concerns the quest of a band of characters in a far-off planet to bring an evil electricity corporation to justice and the ultimate conflict between them and Sephiroth, an evil soldier hell-bent on world domination (it makes perfect sense when you play it). Putting it mildly, there was plenty of material for an eager composer to get his thematic teeth into.

Uematsu again assigned different musical melodies and segments to the main characters, locations and themes, in the same way that Wagner and Williams had done before him. The most notable of these, 'Aerith's Theme', will be known to Classic FM listeners as the piece that stormed the Top 5 of the Hall of Fame in 2013, but there are several different themes here that are comparable to the most memorable of movie themes. The climactic 'One-Winged Angel', for example, has a bizarre choral intensity to it, with Uematsu claiming to have been influenced equally by Igor Stravinsky and Jimi Hendrix.

Technically, another distinguishing feature of *Final Fantasy VII* was its extensive use of Full Motion Videos (known in the business as FMVs), which bookended key segments of the game. Essentially they're sections of video comparable to computer-animated movies that, naturally, required music in exactly the same way. Uematsu, rather than just composing repetitive themes for these sections, completely embraced their filmic quality and approached them in the same way a film composer would. Dazzling action sequences and fantastic visuals were now equalled by their scores, which were every bit as impressive. FMVs and

now the industry standard when it comes to presentation, but Uematsu was among the very first to capitalise on their musical potential.

This melting pot of influences, the rapidly catching-up audio technology and the arrival of a game with themes epic enough to warrant such a huge soundtrack undertaking created the perfect storm. *Final Fantasy VII* remains one of the most critically acclaimed video games of all time and has sold well over 10 million copies worldwide. As a result, Uematsu's themes were now sewn into the canvas of video game music as a genre and, crucially, there was a huge audience for them. There had been successes before, but never one as global as this.

## Games Like Movies

Operating alongside the *Final Fantasy* series was another epic of the RPG genre, the *Ys* series. Pronounced 'ee-su' and released originally on the NEC PC-8801 home computer in Japan, it has a similar history to *Final Fantasy*, but as yet still hasn't taken off globally in the same way, despite new instalments now being released in Western markets. What these giants of Japanese gaming culture do share, though, is a distinctly cinematic aesthetic and story arc and a fantastical setting. Musically, the energetic themes of composer **Yuzo Koshiro** (born 1967) for early games in the series (it kicked off in 1987 with *Ys I: Ancient Ys Vanished*) were dominated by purposefully 'poppy' electronic sounds, with occasional toe-in-the-water visits to orchestral instruments.

Koshiro would later wow the soundtrack world again with his work on the influential Sega Dreamcast title *Shenmue* in 1999, but his role was actually bigger than these titles alone. What his role shows is that this cinematic style of gaming, where players are encouraged to be involved in complex, emotional storylines for long periods of time, was becoming commonplace, even standard. This is fundamental for the soundtracks and their composers: video game music was going to have to step up and soundtrack a range of emotional situations, not merely provide background bleeps for shooting things. If video games were going to be taken seriously as an artform, then the music needed to share that goal of complete, emotional immersion. Composers such as Koshiro and Uematsu were key to this transition.

More to the point, the Western world was now seeing just what the Japanese game developers and composers had been doing, and it was time for them to compete. The US and Europe, with their by now formidable history of film music and classical music, was surely poised to make some serious contributions to the genre too.

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# The Arrival of Orchestral Scores

It's perhaps unfair to say that the Western world of video game music had some catching up to do, but it can't be denied that the focus, until the late 1990s, had very much been on Japan and its burgeoning orchestral prowess. As we established, Japan had created something resembling a first wave of video game music, thanks to Uematsu, Kondo, Sugiyama and Koshiro.

What the US and Europe had going in their favour, however, was a huge boom in video game sales as the 1990s proceeded, and the lucrative prospect of movie tie-ins. Williams' music for monster-selling movies and franchises such as *Star Wars*, *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* and others had been scaled down to soundtrack the more lo-fi sounds of the 1980s and 90s video game market, but with CD technology and high-quality audio becoming a standard on home consoles, the idea of putting an orchestral soundtrack to a home video game was now turning into a reality.

## The John Williams Effect

It's worth noting the huge effect that film soundtrack composer and all-round Hollywood legend **John Williams** (born in 1932) has had on video game music, perhaps without him really realising it. As the movie industry gradually began to tap into the potential of movie tie-in video games, Williams' music has played a big part in the video games industry. A very healthy proportion of all the films that Williams scores gets turned into video games at one point or another and, logically, his music goes with it. It's been that way since his scores for the early *Star Wars* films and it's happened with titles as diverse as *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Superman* and the *Indiana Jones* and *Harry Potter* series.

As we'll find out in this chapter, Williams' work has meant that there's an orchestral inspiration for newer composers who seek to emulate and recreate the power of film music and emotional resonance in their game soundtracks – sometimes by directly adding to Williams' work for specific games.

The most incredible thing about Williams' effect on the world of video game music, though, must be that, to this day, he has never composed a single note of music especially for the medium. But his influence on composers such as Michael Giacchino has been crucial in the early stages of their careers.

## Michael Giacchino: Early Adopter

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He's better known nowadays for his work on movie blockbusters such as the *Star Trek* and *Planet of the Apes* franchise reboots (not to mention numerous awards for his work, including scores for *Lost*, *The Incredibles*, and *Up*), but New Jersey native **Michael Giacchino** (born 1967) began his career as an intern at Universal Pictures in the early 1990s. However, thanks to his tenacity and some classes at the prestigious Juilliard School of Music in New York, he quickly wound up in the heady world of video games at Disney Interactive in Los Angeles, composing music for the movie tie-in release of *The Lion King* in 1994, as well as some smaller titles.

Having proved himself capable of handling prestigious, money-making titles, Giacchino was handed an incredible opportunity – to compose incidental music for the *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* video game, released on Sony PlayStation and Sega Saturn in 1997. Giacchino was to provide new music for the game version of the blockbuster Steven Spielberg movie of the same name to go alongside the themes that Williams had composed for the film's soundtrack, which also featured in the game.

What set this release apart from Giacchino's other work and, indeed, much of the wider industry at the time, was that it used a full symphony orchestra in the recording process. Incredibly, this was something of a fluke, according to Giacchino himself, and an orchestral recording was secured only when Steven Spielberg heard demo versions of the score, asking when he was likely to hear the music recorded properly.

The rest is, as they say, history. Spielberg was instantly impressed by the work that Giacchino did to complement the existing Williams film score, and engaged him once again in 1999 for the first instalment of a brand new series of World War II-based video games that he'd been developing, called *Medal of Honor*. Giacchino, buoyed by the success of his orchestral soundtrack for *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, composed a compellingly cinematic series of cues for the game, which saw the main character, Jimmy Patterson, represented by two noble themes of his own. The game, a first-person shoot-'em-up, has spawned nearly a dozen sequels and spin-offs, for most of which Giacchino has returned to provide the music.

The natural capacity for video game music to behave in the same way and perform the same function as the music written for a Hollywood movie was given another boost and the number of games with high-budget, high-quality orchestral soundtracks soared.

Giacchino went on to become one of the most sought-after composers in Hollywood, winning an Academy Award in 2010 for his soundtrack to the Disney–Pixar animation *Up*, and working closely with young buck director J. J. Abrams on his TV shows *Lost* and *Alice*, and then his newer contributions to the *Star Trek* franchise. He is, more than any other video game music composer, proof that the music of the games world was rapidly gaining as much

cultural credence and clout as the movie world.

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## Orchestras Everywhere

With a standard of orchestral music in video games now set, the late 1990s and early 2000s became a rich and fertile ground where a once fledgling band of composers could begin to make a stable, fruitful living.

British-born **Harry Gregson-Williams** (born in 1961) and his soundtracks for the late entries in the *Metal Gear Solid* series of espionage thriller games were to become industry standard in terms of their exposure, budget and acclaim. Gregson-Williams, who cut his teeth as an assistant to the great film soundtrack composer Hans Zimmer, didn't let his acclaim as a film music composer put him off dipping a toe into the world of video game music – and he had tremendous success.

The *Metal Gear Solid* series has enjoyed multiple sequels since the first game was released in 1998 (two earlier Japan-only releases in the *Metal Gear* series predate this first proper Western release). A number of other composers have contributed to these later sequels, such as Los Angeles born **Jamie Christopherson** (born in 1975) and **Norihiko Hibino** (born in 1973), giving the whole series an unwieldy range of sounds – it's bound together by a fusion of orchestral bombast, heavily produced electronic sounds and the occasional slushy ballad. The combination of orchestral music with other different styles within the *Metal Gear Solid* series demonstrated that the function of the orchestra in game music by the end of the twentieth century was really quite similar to its role in film music – to serve the game's ever-changing story and aesthetic as needed.

More left-field, ambient examples of orchestration and soundtracking in video games began to emerge as the capacity for experimentation grew. The *Resident Evil* series of games, which began as George Romero-inspired 'survival horror' zombie outbreak adventures, provided early examples of video game music straying from the orchestral mould. The first instalment was released by game developers Capcom in 1996 on Sony PlayStation and was notable for its use of eerie, disjointed music, conjured by Japanese composers Makoto Tomozawa, Akira Kaida, and Masami Ueda.

The soundtrack to the original *Resident Evil* sounds rather dated nowadays, with its industrial sound effects and occasional bursts of synthesizer and rock beats, but the sequel *Resident Evil 2* and *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis*, display a much more sophisticated use of sound. Masami Ueda's, Shusaku Uchiyama's and Syun Nishigaki's use of high, screechy strings and occasional flurries of thundering percussion is far more cinematic and actually sounds closer to Bernard Herrmann's legendary scores for Alfred Hitchcock's movie thrillers, such as *Psycho*.

and *North by Northwest*.

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The *Resident Evil* games' music became popular enough to warrant its own orchestral concert in 1999 with the New Japan Philharmonic Orchestra playing this chillingly sophisticated music to a live audience. The subsequent live recording of the concert has gone on to have a life of its own, and was re-released in the US in 2001.

Music for games such as *Halo: Combat Evolved* (popularly known simply as *Halo*) took this broad approach even further, with composers **Martin O'Donnell** (born in 1955) and **Michael Salvatori** (born in 1954) claiming they wanted their soundtrack for the hugely popular shoot-'em-up to sound like 'a little Samuel Barber meets [electro and disco pioneer] Giorgio Moroder'.

*Halo* is in itself a benchmark game that spawned a seemingly unending series of sequels and add-ons to cope with the huge fan demand (originally released in 2001, it's estimated that the series has sold over 50 million units worldwide). The themes composed for the game have become equally beloved, with the choral-inspired soundtrack album being released to acclaim (and not inconsiderable sales) in 2002.

## **Jeremy Soule: Striking Out Alone**

Thanks to the demand for orchestral sounds in video games, composers such as Iowa-born **Jeremy Soule** (born in 1975) soon became big names in the industry, and Soule in particular has come to represent the journey from left field to mainstream.

Soule's contribution to the world of game soundtracks began as early as 1994 when he was employed as a composer by the US arm of Japanese gaming giant Square (the company that was responsible for the *Final Fantasy* series). Early successes such as 1995's *Secret of Evermore* (an adventure game where the player's role alternates between a boy and a shape-shifting dragon (obviously), utilised minimal sounds and simple scores, not entirely reminiscent of the orchestral sound that characterises his more recent works.

The turning point came in 2000 when Soule, riding the success of composing the award-winning score to the popular PC war strategy game *Total Annihilation* (which jostled with Giacchino's *The Lost World* soundtrack as one of the earliest orchestral video game soundtracks in 1997), founded his own production company dedicated to making soundtracks. Soule Media, later to become Artistry Entertainment, was formed with Soule's brother Julian and has been responsible for producing all of Jeremy's landmark scores.

Scores such as *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002) considerably developed the epic orchestral dimension of Soule's writing, containing several rich, lush themes that won the game acclaim (though some accused it of being too short and repetitive). The *Elder Scro*

series, which is a pioneer in what has become known as ‘open world’ gaming (basically a game where players can roam freely in a large-scale 3D world, nowadays often based on the Internet), was to be a charm for Soule, and he has either composed the full score or provided themes for each instalment since. Indeed, thanks to the success of the track ‘Dragonborn’ from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Soule’s soundtrack has recently become a fixture in the Classic FM Hall of Fame survey, placing fifth in 2013 and, along with Uematsu’s *Final Fantasy* at No. 3, pushing Beethoven out of the Top 5.

Just like Giacchino before him, though, Soule has also mined the rich seam of movie titles, composing music for five games in the *Harry Potter* series and also the odd *Star Wars* game as well. (That John Williams effect really does have a wide reach, doesn’t it?) Interestingly, recent years have seen Soule strive to create something outside the gaming world. In 2012, he launched an online fundraising campaign to record his first ‘proper’ traditional orchestral symphony, entitled *The Northerner: Soule Symphony No. 1*. His initial target for the project was to raise \$10,000. When the fundraising campaign closed on 14 April 2013, a gob-smacking total of \$121,227 had been sourced, all from eager fans and consumers desperate to hear what Soule would come up with when released from the confines of a game soundtrack. If anyone ever needed proof that video game music composers could be counted alongside the symphonic greats of history when it comes to appreciative audiences, then Soule would be a good person for them to chat with.

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# The Record Industry

**H**ow do you actually go about listening to a video game soundtrack? Just as it's difficult to really appreciate the full effect of a movie soundtrack unless you buy it separately from the film, a video game soundtrack can't be experienced to the absolute max without turning off the console and putting on your headphones. And, just like the movie soundtrack world, the record industry has made that experience possible. Indeed, sales of video game soundtracks are nowadays substantial enough to propel individual releases and compilations into the upper echelons of the classical charts.

## The start of a trend

Beginning, again perhaps unsurprisingly, in Japan, the appeal and subsequent market for video game soundtracks on CD was an early indicator of the genre's popularity. As mentioned back in the first chapter of this book, the soundtrack for *Dragon Quest*, composed by Yuzo Koshiro in 1986, was the first ever to be recorded by a full symphony orchestra for release on CD. The recording itself did well enough in the Japanese markets to warrant further recordings of Koshiro's work, and in the following years live recordings of his work by the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra and the NHK Symphony Orchestra emerged.

Following Koshiro's initiative, a gaggle of eager video game music composers including Yuzo Koshiro (he of the *Ys* scores) began to see their work recorded and sold to a rapidly increasing domestic fanbase and the occasional discerning importer from the West. Koshiro's recordings culminated in a 1991 release of a symphonic suite from his soundtrack for *ActRaiser*, a popular city-building simulator for the SNES. However big the domestic audience was, recordings of video game music were difficult to come by in territories outside Japan and the appeal did seem limited for some years.

Nowadays, however, compilations and individual soundtrack scores on CD and digital formats regularly crash the classical charts with fervour and abandon. Thanks to the crossover success of Uematsu's *Final Fantasy* soundtracks (*Final Fantasy VIII* is perhaps his most notable recorded hit, having sold somewhere in the region of 400,000 copies worldwide since its release in 1999) and the demand for their recorded release in Western markets, there's now an entire industry dedicated to providing fans with high-quality recordings, easily the technical match of the finest film-score releases.

## The rise of an industry

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Instrumental in this process, in the UK at least, has been composer and arranger **Andre Skeet** (born in 1969). A sometime member of the chamber-pop band The Divine Comedy and a provider of incidental music for TV hits such as *The Apprentice*, Skeet's career took a turn for the truly nerdy when he began work with the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 2011 (them again – they recorded Sugiyama's *Dragon Quest* score a full twenty-five years earlier). With Skeet on arranging and conducting duties, they came up with an album with the inventive title of *The Greatest Video Game Music*. It was a whistle-stop tour of the best-known video game music past and present, with superbly orchestrated versions of the 'hits' including Kondo's *Super Mario Bros.* theme and a suite from *The Legend of Zelda* alongside contemporary numbers such as *Metal Gear Solid*, *World of Warcraft* and, notably, composer Ari Pulkkinen's theme from the huge-selling smartphone-based game *Angry Birds* (remember that name, we'll come back to him later).

This combination of what had become 'standards' in the video game music genre and some modern and left-field choices was a sales winner – the album itself debuted at No. 23 in the Billboard 200. The last orchestral recording to get that high up the chart in its first week of release was Williams' *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, so Skeet and the LPO were in exceedingly good company. This was proof that the market was indeed ready for video game music (though game soundtracks had been bothering the lower end of the charts for some years) and, importantly, that it was financially viable.

Skeet himself sounded a note of caution when the sequel to that compilation came out in 2012. Speaking to Classic FM in the run-up to its release, he admitted that video game music, though it had come a long way, wasn't held in the same regard as its more popular older cousin, film music: 'The music's maybe lagging behind the visuals in some games, but there's some lovely stuff. We're trying to show people what could be done.'

Still, the second release in the series, appropriately titled *The Greatest Video Game Music Vol. 2*, repeated the trick. Its mix of classics and modern innovators was another sales success story (and was available to purchase on a credit card-sized USB drive, if you so desired), providing further evidence that the tide had turned in favour of the gamers. An entire industry had sprung up and was proving to be a chart-winning formula at a time when recorded music sales were going through immense physical, digital and financial change. Proof, as if it were needed, that the video game community was thoroughly dedicated to taking this music to a wider audience.

## The Classic FM Hall of Fame: Is VGM Really Classical?

Please forgive us as we blow our own trumpet a little, but the Classic FM Hall of Fame remains an excellent barometer for classical music in the UK. An annual survey of the nation's classical music listening preferences, it is essentially an enormous poll that ranks the public's favourite pieces of classical music, spanning the worlds of straight classical music from down the centuries (your Beethovens and your Bachs), film music (your John Barrys and your John Williamses) and, absolutely crucially to this book, video game music.

As you can imagine, it was not always this way. When the chart first started back in 1997 it was dominated by the leading lights of the classical establishment. Sitting pretty at No. 1 for the first five years of the chart was Max Bruch's effervescent *Violin Concerto*, and film music as a genre barely featured. As the years went on, movie music composers saw a shift in their favour as the genre became more popular, and big names such as John Williams, John Barry and Howard Shore started to crop up near the business end of the countdown. This shift continued and, now with over 100,000 votes each year, the chart looks set to continue to give us a pretty good picture of what the nation is listening to.

In 2012, video game music made itself known in the chart for the very first time. And not in a wimpy, propping-up-the-bottom-end kind of way, either. Straight in at No. 16 was perhaps the most popular video game music composer of all time, Nobuo Uematsu, with his soundtrack to *Final Fantasy VII*, sandwiched neatly between Pachelbel's *Canon* and Barber's *Adagio* for string orchestra. Millions of listeners heard the elegiac 'Aerith's Theme', probably for the first time, and reacted strongly. There were voices of support, of course, but there were nearly an equal number of the confused or the downright irate: the Internet was briefly ablaze, but the 'is video game music classical music?' debate was yet to have its day.

The following year saw a concerted social-media campaign put in place to try to get even more video game music further up the chart, headed by an enthusiast named Mark Robin Robins, a PR man and game music oracle, engaged a legion of Facebook fans and Twitter followers in an attempt to boost the profile of video game music in the chart, focusing on a few key pieces.

In the end it worked and, for the first time in the history of the Hall of Fame, video game music went into the Top 5. Twice. Uematsu's *Final Fantasy* was there at No. 3, and Soule's music for *The Elder Scrolls* series was at No. 5. That wasn't all: **Grant Kirkhope's** (born 1966) plaintive score for the gardening strategy game (yes, really) *Viva Piñata* also made a leap into the chart, landing at No. 174. These pieces not only announced (or bellowed, perhaps) the arrival of video game music in popular culture, but they also pushed Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5* down into sixth place – and the establishment wasn't going to take it lying down.

Raging debates ensued in the natural battleground of the Internet age, the commen

section of an online news story. Staunch classical fans, open-minded intermediates and vociferous gamers all joined in the robust debate, all discussing whether or not video game music deserved to be in the Hall of Fame at all, if *The Elder Scrolls* really was ‘better’ than Beethoven’s *Piano Concerto No. 5*, or if the notion of an organised campaign to encourage voting was really in the right spirit. Composers James Hannigan, Jason Graves, Jack Wall and Garry Schyman (find out more about all of them later in the book) all got involved in the debate, using their distinct advantage of being alive over the likes of Beethoven to voice the satisfaction that video game music was getting a look-in.

The main thing, of course, was that no matter where the scores ended up in the chart, the debate was happening and video game music was crossing over into the mainstream. If you’re so inclined, do have a read of the ensuing debate after the 2013 Hall of Fame – some of the comments for and against video game music’s featuring in the chart have to be seen to be believed. You can find it in our video game music hub at [ClassicFM.com/discover/video-game-music](http://ClassicFM.com/discover/video-game-music).

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# Video Game Music in the Concert Hall

If you go to a concert of video game music, you will see costumes. You will see gaggles of beautifully, elaborately and ornately dressed revellers, desperate to represent their favourite video game characters specifically for the moment when their theme will be played. And when the conductor whips the orchestra into that particular theme, there will be whooping, hollering and all brands of general concert frippery. There also may well be a giant video screen, displaying dazzling gameplay from whichever game's score is being played, with title screens alone prompting the audience to erupt into delirious cheers of recognition comparable to the reception to the Rolling Stones playing the first few licks of 'Start Me Up'. Basically, all the things that you would never see at a faithful, reverent recital of a Brahms symphony will be seen at a concert of video game music.

Besides the cultural (and, it has to be said, for the most part generational) shift, there are some other serious distinctions between the modern video game concert and the modern classical concert. For a start, video game concerts sell out. Fast. The first concert of Uematsu's *Final Fantasy* works, which was held at the Royal Albert Hall in London back in 2011, took three weeks to sell out. When the concert returned the following year, it took around two hours, which, frankly, is more like the ticket-buying reaction you'd expect to get if you suddenly announced a forthcoming show from Elvis Presley with a support slot from Freddie Mercury than a normal classical concert.

At present, concert venues across the UK are regularly playing host to video game concerts from *re:PLAY: Symphony of Heroes* at London's Barbican Centre to the international touring phenomenon of Video Games Live. What's more, they all feature some of the world's finest orchestras.

More and more, the live arena is considered one of the most important growth areas of the video game music industry. But how did this cultural phenomenon, this live juggernaut emerge? Where were the seeds sown? Again, the answer lies in Japan.

## Early Video Game Music Concerts

The first ever concert to feature music solely from video games took place in Tokyo, on 2 August 1987. The city's Suntory Hall was given over to the music of Sugiyama's first two *Dragon Quest* games, turned into symphonic suites, played by the Tokyo String Mus

Combination Playing Group and conducted by the composer himself. In what's more likely to be a quirk of translation than a genuine case of bad titling, the concert was named 'The Family Classic Concert'. Sugiyama masterminded the whole event and the subsequent concerts in the same series (eighteen of them in total), and they proved a hit every time.

For fans of the *Dragon Quest* games (of which there were evidently many), the thrill of hearing the scores from their favourite game played live by an orchestra, or at least a String Music Combination Playing Group, was huge. Just as home computers and consoles took video games out of the arcades and into the home, video game concerts were now taking the music from solitary bedrooms and living rooms across Japan back out to the communal world, and, of all places, its concert halls.

## As Popularity Grows, So Do the Programmes

As a result of this early success, concerts of video game music began to spread in popularity and frequency across Japan, with Sugiyama as something of a figurehead in organising them. His 'Family Classic' concerts soon spawned the 'Orchestral Game Concerts', which was a fully-fledged concert series made up of the game music of several different composers for the genre.

Beginning in 1991 and featuring the Tokyo City Philharmonic Orchestra, these new concerts featured a varied programme, representative of the then current state of Japanese video game music. So, Sugiyama's own *Dragon Quest III* and *IV* kicked off the first of these concerts, but other popular pieces including Kondo's theme from *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* also featured, alongside Uematsu's *Final Fantasy IV*.

There were five of these concerts in total between 1991 and 1996, all of them with a different programme of music and a different orchestra. Composers were soon lining up to conduct their own works with top-notch orchestras, again proving that the secret to longevity in video game music was to take it out of the bedroom or the studio and into the concert hall.

In 1992, for instance, composer **Yoko Kanno** (born in 1964) took to the podium to conduct her music from Sega strategy game *Nobunaga's Ambition*, and 1995 saw an extended arrangement of Uematsu's music from *Final Fantasy VI*. Basically, the concerts were an accurate representation of the state of video game music in Japan in the early 1990s and, more importantly, an indicator that ticket sales could be healthy enough to carry the event over to Europe and America.

If you're looking for a flavour of what these now legendary concerts sounded like, there are many of them scattered across YouTube, ready for you to explore. However, if you're looking for an official recording of the shows, you might have to prepare yourself for a long

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