



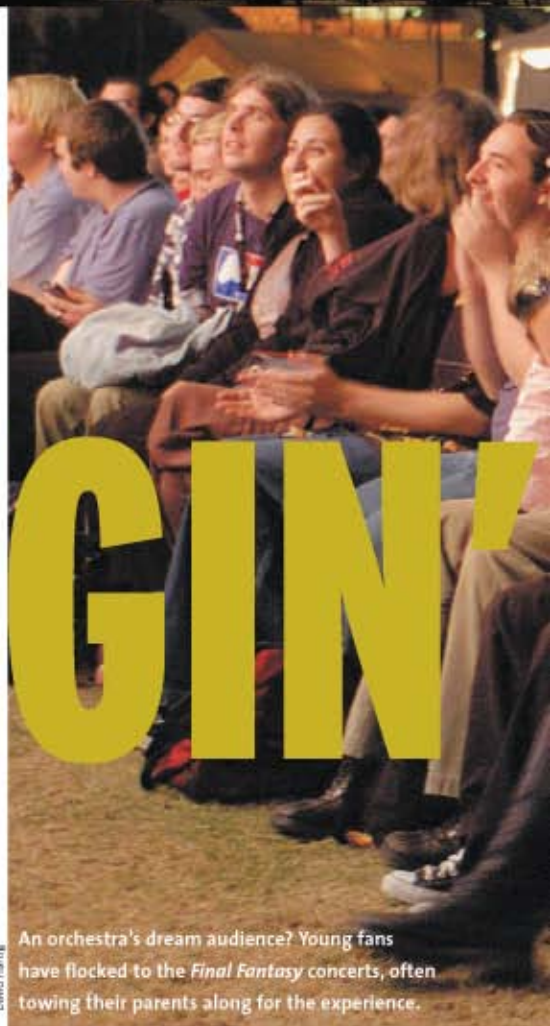
by Rebecca Winzenried



THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHAN- GIN'

Shifts in audience tastes and lifestyles are affecting pops programs. Are orchestras keeping up?

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David Healy

An orchestra's dream audience? Young fans have flocked to the *Final Fantasy* concerts, often towing their parents along for the experience.

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ally sponsored series. Artists were paired with orchestras in cities identified by Argent, and marketing was a cooperative effort between the orchestras and the promoter. "These orchestras live, breathe, and eat in their market, but we don't," says Young. "They know the radio stations that would be interested, the alternative press." The sponsor's support allowed a larger-than-normal marketing push, according to Reid McLean, director of presentations at the Minnesota Orchestra. The Seal concert in Minneapolis was a quick sellout, with the orchestra acting as presenter.

Charts were prepared by various arrangers with an eye toward giving musicians more than a backup-band status. "If the musicians are bored, that translates to the artists—and to the audience," says Gideon Toeplitz, who served as a consultant to orchestras for the series. He anticipates more dates, or multiple dates, being added to the series calendar, to take advantage of the fact that charts are available.

Eager Ears

The "One Night Only" approach of such special events may be bringing a new crop of artists to sell out the pops venue. But what, really, does it offer orchestras in the long run? Pops series, as programmed by an orchestra, have traditionally been viewed as a bridge to the regular classical series, a way to draw audiences with some lighter fare,

San Diego symphonies, Symphony Silicon Valley, and the Chicagoland Pops over the past year. Rabid young fans of the music by Japanese composer Nobuo Uematsu have made a run on the box office for every *Final Fantasy* date since the U.S. debut by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2004. Tickets often sell out within a day with little promotion required, as advance word spreads through game fan web sites and Internet chat rooms.

Final Fantasy concert promoter Christopher Davis, who logged several years working in classical-music presentations, firmly believes that video-game music is the next logical step in the tradition of drawing audiences into classical concerts through pops. Orchestras have been playing incidental music for a hundred years, he says. And what is Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King"—a classical pops staple—if not a series of scenes much like the challenges found in fantasy role-playing games?

The advantage of video-game concerts is that audience members already have a deep emotional connection with the music and they want to hear it performed live, often traveling some distance to do so. "That eagerness to hear live orchestra music spells an opportunity," says Davis. Video screens mounted above the stage show some game clips, but for most of the concert, they are focused on musicians in the orchestra.

which owns the game, he wrote, "It's a pity the ASO couldn't insert viscerally charged, full-flavor music from its core repertoire, say part of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* or Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*."

Comment on the music itself has been mixed, but film and video-game scores certainly lend themselves more easily to orchestral interpretation than rock or hip-hop ever will. More melodic rock tunes of earlier decades are gradually making their way into pops programs—Beatles fare is perhaps the most successful, with acts such as Classical Mystery Tour gaining favorable notices. "People will come out of the woodwork for anything Beatles," according to one orchestra manager.

And there is the phenomenon of established rock artists going classical: Elvis Costello will make an appearance on the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's new Pops Rocks series for a program that includes his orchestral work *Il Sogno*. The series will also include the U.S. orchestra debut of hipster-

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and hopefully entice them to return for the heavier-lifting programs—which they would enjoy from their regular subscription seats.

That role may very well be taken by pops-oriented programs of a most unlikely type. The orchestra world has really not seen anything quite like the runaway success of the "Dear Friends: Music from Final Fantasy" series. Concerts featuring orchestral versions of music from the *Final Fantasy* video-game series have been performed by the Atlanta, Detroit, Fort Worth, and

"Essentially, it's just a classical concert with a little video thrown in."

From there, Davis believes, it isn't much of a leap to imagine pops concerts presented by the orchestras themselves, featuring works of Uematsu or other game-music composers coupled with some Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky. In fact, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* music critic Pierre Ruhe suggested just that in his review of the *Final Fantasy* concert performed by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra last June. Noting that the program was pre-packaged by Square Enix,