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Video game music beyond its original function: Practices, styles, and ends

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Rapidly growing in complexity of compositional practices, styles, and ends, video game music is an art form that surpasses its original function as “background music” as well as any utilitarian, stereotypical expectations of the general public. Many video game soundtracks have been issued separately from their original contexts and offered to the public as musical entertainment or art; these compositions communicating musical values transcending their initial function are conceived for the enjoyment of the listener outside of the in-game experience. Many scores have also been arranged for live performance by alternative media and occasionally published for amateur consumption. In my study I analyze selected video game scores from the past two decades and examine their nature and organization. These scores represent a wide variety of compositional traits and musical styles, from Wagnerian leitmotif techniques using a conventional orchestra to a series of unrelated cues of experimental harmonies and instrumentations. Some composers borrow ideas from recognizable sources, including the James Bond film scores or the works of classical masters such as Mozart and Rimsky-Korsakov. Many scores approximate the common Hollywood film practice by using either a live or synthesized orchestra, while others incorporate unique synthesized sounds or an entirely different sound ideal. I also examine the relationship of arrangements of video game music to their original sources: many games have corresponding albums of music that go beyond the original score’s intent. For instance, piano arrangement albums allow composers to explore the timbre of the piano, while the corresponding sheet music allows consumers to create their own role in the soundtrack. Orchestral arrangement albums, which are live or studio recordings, generally exist where the source material is synthesized, allowing composers to hear their music as it may have been originally conceived, possibly expanding on musical thoughts originally expressed in the scores.