MIDI ensemble generates retro video game nostalgia

Maria Singh, Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, March 8, 2016 7:00 am

Cal Poly Pomona’s Department of Music held its quarterly Musical Instrument Digital Interface ensemble on Feb. 29 at the Music Recital Hall, which focused on the importance and evolution of music in video games.

The event started at 8 p.m. and featured selections of music pieces from notable video games such as “Risk of Rain” and “FTL: Faster Than Light.”

Called the Era of Dreams 2.0: Glimpse of Tomorrow, this quarter’s MIDI ensemble revolved around the notion that current video game music is not as memorable as the music presented in video games from the 1980s.

At the start of the program, the audience viewed a clip called “Video Game Music” by the YouTube channel Extra Credits. The clip delved into the history and art of video game music.

“Sound quality is way better, and today’s game composers have far more resources to work with. At the same time, modern game music has become a lot less memorable because of all the big, expensive toys they have access to now,” stated the clip. “Symphonies and quality gear have moved us away from that powerful element the old 80s tip tunes had to rely on: simplicity.”

The video proceeded to say that even though modern video game music is not once what it was, some producers have created a way to merge simple melodies with new technological advances for renovated, memorable pieces.

Kevin Rotunni, an audience member from International Polytechnic High School, talked about his thoughts on the YouTube clip and what it meant to the MIDI ensemble performance.

“It’s really well done. I agree that a good, strong [and] simple melody can very greatly help a piece of music. And if that melody is lost, it won’t be nearly as memorable,” said Rotunni.

According to Rotunni, the selection of musical performances from the video games corresponded to how an actual video game progresses. Similar to many video games, which start nice and easy but get harder,
the MIDI ensemble’s performances started off softly and climaxed to a riveting finish.

The students who participated in the MIDI ensemble performance familiarized themselves with how to set up audio components and used their knowledge to harmonize different instruments to control and create a range of sounds.

Performers used their skills and techniques to entertain audience members, such as first-year music student Erica Vergara.

“As a music major, there’s some things I can kind of tell that are sometimes things that don’t always go right from nerves and stuff like that,” said Vergara. “It’s nice seeing it from this point of view compared to performing myself. I think it’s nice though, just to have an audience view.”

To Vergara, the MIDI ensemble performers made her feel as if she’s playing an actual video game, and it helped her build a stronger appreciation for music.

“It reminds me of playing in the beginning when you go through stuff and the game starts picking up and you go on different levels. It definitely helps me imagine how it would be,” said Vergara. “There’s always different types of music, and there’s always seeing music in different ways. I normally play classical and just seeing it in video games and even in movies. It’s really interesting.”

Though, despite whether or not video game music from the past is more memorable than the music in today’s video games, the director of the ensemble, Marci Katznelson, described the importance of video game music at the ensemble.

Katznelson asked members of the audience questions about their favorite video games and if they remembered the music from those games. Everyone raised hands and said yes.

According to Katznelson, the reason for this phenomenon is that music is essential to video games because it is a large part of what makes the video game experience memorable for members in the gaming world.

“It is really true that music of games holds a very special place in our hearts. … I have to tell you that it is my belief that music from those games does not equal importance, but my belief is actually more important other than the game itself,” said Katznelson to the audience. “It is the music that resonates in our souls, infiltrates our hearts and, of course, it is the music that brings and creates a tapestry of color and brings the entire world of the video game to life and allows you to enter a whole new world and experience.”