

INGEAR

# Game on for the soundtrack slayer Eimear Noone

The Galway-born orchestral composer is taking video gaming music to another level, writes Graeme Lennox

Graeme Lennox

October 8 2017, 12:01am, The Sunday Times



Eimear Noone studied at Trinity College and the Dublin Conservatory of Music and Drama

Share



Save



If you have ever battled wolves at the gates of Draenor or helped Link rescue Princess Zelda then chances are you've been moved by the music of Eimear Noone.

The award-winning Galway-born composer has worked on some of gaming's biggest franchises including Overwatch, World of Warcraft, Metal Gear Solid, Starcraft and Legend of Zelda.

Noone, who lives in Malibu, California with her Emmy-nominated husband, Craig Stuart Garfinkle, has an audience numbering in the hundreds of millions. Later this month, the pair will perform some of gaming's most beloved songs in front of 20,000 fans at PlayersXpo, a two-day celebration of the video games industry taking place in Dublin.

From the rudimentary bleeps of Asteroids to the sprawling soundtracks of Zelda, game music has grown from an afterthought to an essential component of the storytelling process. Now a legitimate industry in its own right, soundtracks are performed by orchestras at concerts across the world.

“We have come a long way from the days when I’d show up to an orchestra and they’d think we’re going to play noises from Pong for an entire concert,” says Noone.

“Video game music has touched and moved hundreds of millions of people all over the world. I don’t think of it the way I think of a Mahler symphony but it has its own place, just as pop art is a relevant form of art.”



Noone has worked on top titles such as Overwatch

Much like the early days of the Hollywood film industry, music in the 8-bit era was often overlooked. What scores there were, were created by programmers with a musical background. But software limitations meant they amounted to little more than a series of electronic bleeps and chirps. Advances in technology have made music integral to the storytelling process, with interactive soundtracks setting the tone for some of the most emotional in-game moments.

Soundtracks from titles such as Final Fantasy and Halo can mean as much to gamers as songs from the Beatles and Stones. And as games have quietly infiltrated mainstream culture, so too has their music.

“It’s like a favourite album,” says Noone. “You remember the time you first heard it but it’s more intense because you’re often interacting with other people when you listen.”

Noone, who studied at Trinity College and the Dublin Conservatory of Music and Drama, got into the industry by chance when she and a group of classmates were approached in a bar.

“We were in the Buttery after a chapel choir rehearsal when David Downes, creator of Celtic Woman, came in and asked us what we were doing tomorrow. All we knew was we were working for a Japanese composer, and were getting paid £40 to spend a day in the studio singing and throwing arrangements together.

“Six months later I got a call from my brother saying he was looking at my name in the credits to Metal Gear Solid.”

Noone moved to Los Angeles where her first job was working on a fantasy game that would become a global phenomenon. “I remember walking into the studio for World of Warcraft and getting goose bumps seeing the cinematics for the first time. I had no idea it was going to be as huge as it got but here we are 100m players later.”

As a serious musician who studied the great composers, Noone has encountered snobbishness but it's something that has waned since video game music started gaining recognition from the Baftas, Grammys and Hollywood Music in Media Awards. “The best musicians I know take every form of music on its own merit,” she says.



Noone has conducted sold-out concerts across the world

“Any reservations last for about 10 minutes until the rehearsal when they look at the part and realise how tough it is. I did a gig with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland in December and half of them turned up in cosplay. When film music started coming into concert halls 15 years ago people said it wasn’t real music. Video game music will have that same place on the programme in 10 years’ time.

“If you look at Beethoven’s sketch notes he started off with a very complex idea and simplified it until you are left with the ‘dah, dah, dah, dah’ of Beethoven’s Fifth. Likewise, it’s bloody difficult doing arrangements for Donkey Kong, Tetris or Medal of Honor.”

While video game music may be going mainstream, its hardcore fan base ensures it never gets stuffy. After travelling the world conducting sold-out concerts in places such as Madison Square Garden and the Sydney Opera House, Noone thrives on the infectious enthusiasm.

“Gamers are the best audience because they are so respectful and appreciative,” she says. “I’m all for whooping and hollering.”

Noone and Garfinkle, who founded the Dublin International Game Music Festival two years ago, were convinced to join forces with PlayersXpo by Gamestop co-founder Michael Finucane. The pair will launch The Celtic Link, an album of video game music compiled with the DIT Traditional Irish Music Ensemble, at the event. They will also perform the Retro Games Live concert of 1980s and 1990s games music on successive nights.

“The two things we had in our house growing up were music and video games. I didn’t think I would ever get to combine the two,” says Noone.

“It’ll be magical performing in front of a home audience and I’m sure there will be tears streaming down my face.”