

Extra

KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Alpin Hong plays everything from Mendelssohn to 'Super Mario' in Gilmore for Kids show

Posted by [Mark Wedel](#) | [Special to the Gazette](#) April 22, 2008 06:47AM
Categories: [Gilmore International Keyboard Festival](#)

KALAMAZOO -- Award-winning classical pianist Alpin Hong took questions from the audience at the end of his Gilmore for Kids presentation Monday night at the Kalamazoo Central High School Auditorium.

A girl asked if he has fun practicing.

"I have more fun..." Hong began, then stopped. He decided to give the honest answer. "When I was young, Nintendo came out," Hong told the crowd of families.

"Piano," he said dully, holding his hand low as if weighed down by the instrument. The other hand went up and he excitedly declared, "Nintendo!"

Hong is 31, but the kids in the audience could tell he understood their pain.

The Kalamazoo/Battle Creek native (who now lives in Redland, Cal.) is an acclaimed classical recording artist, has played Carnegie Hall, but he knows that the early steps of mastering the piano are difficult and tedious.

He got laughs by going through the motions of finger exercise, rolling his eyes and pretending to slam his head down in boredom. But all those scales and arpeggios make up 80 per cent of music, Hong said. Master them, and you're ready to create magic.

The greatest special effect for the screen is music, Hong demonstrated. The themes of "Star Wars" and "Superman" grandly soared as "the music of heroes," and the happy-go-lucky theme of "SpongeBob SquarePants" heralded screwy cartoon characters. He played the mystical "Harry Potter" theme and churned the rolling rhythm of a storm-tossed ship in music from "Pirates of the Caribbean" -- "which is also a bit like the rhythm of Johnny Depp's walk," Hong said.

The music doesn't have to be complex to be powerful. Using the creepy theme of "Halloween," Hong created a chill with a simple little series of notes. He showed how just two low notes in the movie "Jaws" "made a whole generation think we're going to be chased and eaten by a shark."

Of course, music doesn't even need a movie to create images in one's head. He had the kids picture a butterfly that he swore is within the fluttering "Prelude in C-sharp minor" by Rachmaninoff.

Some kids got restless during the Bach and Chopin pieces early in the presentation. But near the end, the speedy workout of Mendelssohn's Rondo Capriccioso had some younger kids jumping around with excitement.

But the biggest hit was the piece of lighthearted music that had kids exclaiming, "Mario!"

Hong played the theme from the first level of the Nintendo game "Super Mario Brothers," his arrangement getting surprising complexity out of what originally was a 1985 tune of bleeps. He then did a serious examination of the music from level two of the game, how its halting rhythm foretold the perilous pits the hopping video game plumber had to get across.

He had worked the Mario music into his big Carnegie Hall debut, Hong said, and had a lot of fun there seeing kids in the good seats explaining to oldsters that it's music "about a fat Italian plumber."

Kids in at the show were entertained, maybe even educated. Owen Edwards, 8, of Kalamazoo, said his favorite part was the video game music, impressed that Hong not only played the first level music -- the "doot-dee-doot-dee-doot," as Edwards sang -- but knew the music of the game's second level as well.

Nick Hubbell, 13, of Kalamazoo, said, "It was really cool. I thought he put a lot of humor in it -- music and humor together."

Music is fun, but learning piano, or any instrument, is a necessary chore, Hong said. Kids always seem to be pushed to be like the neighborhood grind: "They tell you, 'See that girl, she practices 10 hours a day.' Well, you can smile and say, 'Eventually she'll get arthritis,'" Hong said.

In addition to the piano teacher's assignments, find a piece of music you like and conquer it, Hong told the kids: "Practicing is fun when you're learning something you want to learn."

Even if it is just a tune from the video game you'd rather be playing.