Number one – Sergei Rachmaninoff’s second piano concerto. Sublime. Number two – *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughan-Williams. Not always my cup of tea, but incredibly popular, beautifully crafted, and a constant presence at the very top of the chart.

Number three – *Final Fantasy* soundtrack? Number five – *The Elder Scrolls* soundtrack?

Finally.

I’ve been a fan of video games for a very long time, and I’ve had a literally life-long passion for music; it was inevitable that these two interests would collide at some point, and when I began to hear the orchestral scores of composers such as Nobuo Uematsu and Jeremy Soule, I was immediately obsessed.

I have several complete video game soundtracks in my music library, as well as CDs from the likes of the London Philharmonic Orchestra and a recording of a live concert by the Czech Philharmonic composed entirely of video game music. I wrote an academic essay comparing the soundtrack of Super Mario Galaxy to Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* for my International Baccalaureate Diploma. And I’ve arranged music from *The Elder Scrolls* for solo organ. And performed it in a recital.

And at seeing the Classic FM Hall of Fame this year, I was absolutely delighted. At last, these soundtracks are getting the recognition they deserve in the classical music world: they’re being appreciated as some of the best contemporary classical music out there, easily on a par with, and often surpassing, film soundtracks. Thrust into the spotlight by two albums recorded by the London Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Andrew Skeet, and by Howard Goodall’s *Saturday Night at the Movies* swapping the cinema for games consoles on November 10th last year, they’ve managed to enthuse Classic FM listeners sufficiently to claim two spots in the top 5 of their annual chart of the nation’s favourite classical music.

But I’m afraid that’s not quite the case.

Cue instant controversy, outraged comments, and despair at the state of pretty much everything from The Youth Of Today to the Definition Of Classical Music to Bloody Social Media. And the euphoria at the victory of the genre lessens.

It’s easy to ignore the rants of the minority of close-minded individuals who clearly haven’t even bothered to listen to the music. Attacking a full orchestral soundtrack for being nothing more than mechanical beeps and boops isn’t going to get you very far. Similarly, people who claim that they shouldn’t be in the charts because they’re not classical music need their heads examined, as other types of soundtrack have peppered the charts since it began, as well as works by other modern classical composers. Film soundtracks occupy 8 spots in the top 100, and Karl Jenkins, John Rutter, and Ludovico Einaudi also appear in the charts. The soundtrack to *Downton Abbey* is also there.

Ignorance and extreme purism aside, however, there’s still a lot of criticism going around. And it’s mainly to do with exactly **how** Soule and Uematsu came to rank among the greatest classical composers of all time.

A typical reaction might read something like, “I’ve never heard these played on Classic FM! Social media campaigns have hijacked our charts. This music doesn’t deserve to be in the top 5”.

Dear me, where to start with this.

Look, I’m not going to claim for a second that I think Soule and Uematsu have equal talent to Mozart and Beethoven. But I would point out that the video gaming pair only have one piece each in the charts, whereas the 18th and 19th century superstars have several apiece. Nevertheless, the majority of criticism levelled at Final Fantasy and The Elder Scrolls appearing in the top five appears, to me, to be based on a gross misunderstanding of the purpose of the Hall of Fame, or indeed any such chart.

Is the purpose of the Classic FM Hall of Fame to find out what the best pieces of classical music ever written are? Not really. Otherwise, why do we need a new poll every year? Not even the two video game soundtracks that featured have been composed since the last Hall of Fame. The amount of classical music composed every year is trivial compared to what exists already. But if classical music barely changes, why does the chart turn out different results each year?

The answer is simple: even if music doesn’t change much, opinions do. New recordings, anniversary years of composers, and other such factors can all influence this. It’s no coincidence, I think, that Rachmaninoff tops the charts in the year of his 140th birthday. The added significance of this means that more people have been listening to it, and therefore more people have voted for it. Simple as that. And lots more people have been listening to video game music recently, thanks to the aforementioned LPO albums. Every year, what we’re really voting for is our **current** favourite pieces of classical music.

I’m not going to deny that social media campaigns probably played a big part too. But if this music can inspire that kind of response from its fanbase, it deserves its spot. Moreover, it’s fulfilled another purpose of the chart: to get people engaged in classical music. Not just listening to it, but actively engaged enough to want to vote for it.

This, I think, is the best thing to come out of the Hall of Fame this year. People who never would have taken part in it at all have voted, discussed, and campaigned in their thousands, and it could be a way into classical music for many of them. Similarly, it’s challenged the preconceptions of many long-term classical music appreciators in a way that’s provoked debate about the genre, and widened the experience of everyone. To be clear, there’s a lot of positive feedback as well as negative.

Next year, I have no doubt that both Final Fantasy and The Elder Scrolls will chart significantly lower than they have this year. Deservedly so. I hope that people will vote without being told to by social media campaigns, and I hope they will vote honestly. But I also hope that video game music will continue its advance, and that the resources of Twitter and Facebook do not go unplumbed by others. I’d love to see a “Mozart Clarinet Concerto for number one” campaign. Because it inspires debate, and gets more people engaged with the process. This can only be a good thing for classical music.

Mostly, though, I hope that the stubborn purists, who even now are using those same networking tools that helped place video game soundtracks on such a pedestal to attempt to destroy it, can recognise that opinions are fragile, and will change over time. So will classical music. We can’t, of course, demand that they like it; but they must learn to accept it, because I’m afraid that’s the way the world works.