Web Guitar Wizard Revealed at Last

EIGHT months ago a mysterious image showed up on YouTube, the video-sharing site that now shows more than 100 million videos a day. A sinewy figure in a swimming-pool-blue T-shirt, his eyes obscured by a beige baseball cap, was playing electric guitar. Sun poured through the window behind him; he played in a yellow haze. The video was called simply “guitar.” A black-and-white title card gave the performer’s name as funtwo.

The piece that funtwo played with mounting dexterity was an exceedingly difficult rock arrangement of Pachelbel’s Canon, the composition from the turn of the 18th century known for its solemn chord progressions and its overexposure at weddings. But this arrangement, attributed on another title card to JerryC, was anything but plodding: it required high-level mastery of a singularly demanding maneuver called sweep-picking.

Over and over the guitarist’s left hand articulated strings with barely perceptible movements, sounding and muting notes almost simultaneously, and playing complete arpeggios through a single stroke with his right hand. Funtwo’s accuracy and velocity seemed record-breaking, but his mouth and jawline — to the extent that they were visible — looked impassive, with none of the exaggerated

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visible — looked impassive, with none of the exaggerated grimaces of heavy metal guitar heroes. The contrast between the soaring bravado of the undertaking and the reticence of the guitarist gave the 5-minute, 20-second video a gorgeous solemnity.

Like a celebrity sex tape or a Virgin Mary sighting, the video drew hordes of seekers with diverse interests and attitudes. Guitar sites, MySpace pages and a Polish video site called Smog linked to it, and viewers thundered to YouTube to watch it. If individual viewings were shipped records, “guitar” would have gone gold almost instantly. Now, with nearly 7.35 million views — and a spot in the site’s 10 most-viewed videos of all time — funtwo’s performance would be platinum many times over. From the perch it’s occupied for months on YouTube’s “most discussed” list, it generates a seemingly endless stream of praise (riveting, sick, better than Hendrix), exegesis, criticism, footnotes, skepticism, anger and awe.

The most basic comment is a question: Who is this guy?

If you follow the leads, this Everest of electric-guitar virtuosity, like so many other online artifacts, turns out to be a portal into a worldwide microculture, this one involving hundreds of highly stylized solo guitar videos, of which funtwo’s is but the most famous. And though they seem esoteric, they have surprising implications: for YouTube, the dissemination of culture, online masquerade and even the future of classical music.

JOHANN PACHELBEL, the great one-hit wonder of the baroque period, originally composed his Canon in D Major for three violins, at least one chord-playing instrument (like a harpsichord or lute) and at least one bass instrument (like a cello or bassoon). With its steady walking rhythm, the piece is well suited to processional, and the bass line is extremely easy to play, a primer on simple chords: D, A, B minor, F-sharp minor, G. A sequence of eight chords repeats about 30 times.

The exacting part is the canon itself: a counterpoint played over the bass, originally by the three violins. The first violin plays variation A, then moves on to B, while the second violin comes in with A. By the time the first violin gets to C, the second starts in with B, and the third violin comes in with A: like three people singing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.”

With 28 variations, the piece becomes supercharged with complexity only to revert to a simpler structure as it ends. If you hadn’t heard it a thousand times before — in the movie “Ordinary People,” in commercials, at all those weddings — it might blow you away.

Last year Jerry Chang, a Taiwanese guitarist who turns 25 on Thursday, set out to create a rock version of the song, which he had been listening to since childhood. It took him two weeks. Others, like Brian Eno, had done so before him, and some listeners say his arrangement is derivative of one composed for the video game “Pump It Up.” But one way or another, his version, “Canon Rock,” rocked.

Once he had his arrangement on paper — and in his fingers, since sweeping is above all a function of motor memory — Mr. Chang decided to publish his work. In the arena of high-speed guitar heroes, though, an audio recording is not enough; the manual virtuosity is almost like a magic trick, and people have to see it to believe it. So he sat on his bed in front of a video camera, fired up his recorded backing track and played his grand, devilish rendition of “Canon Rock.” He then uploaded the video to a Web site he had already set up for his band and waited for a response.

Before long he was inundated with praise, as well as requests for what are called the

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“tabs,” or written music, and the backing track, or digital bass line, which fans of his work downloaded and ran on their own computers. They then hoisted up their Fenders and Les Pauls to test their skills against JerryC’s. One of these guys was funtwo.

By following a series of clues on JerryC’s message board and various “Canon Rock” videos, I was able to trace funtwo’s video to Jeong-Hyun Lim, a 23-year-old Korean who taught himself guitar over the course of the last six years. Now living in Seoul, he listens avidly to Bach and Vivaldi, and in 2000 he took a month of guitar lessons. He plays an ESP, an Alfee Custom SEC-28OTC with gold-colored detailing.

A close analysis of his playing style and a comparison of his appearance in person with that of the figure in the video, left little doubt that Mr. Lim is the elusive funtwo.

Recently he e-mailed me an account of how he came to make his YouTube video. His English is excellent, from years spent at Auckland University in New Zealand, where he plans to return in March.

“First time when I saw JerryC’s ‘Canon’ video, it was so amazing, I thought I might play it,” he wrote. “So I practiced it by myself using tab and backing track from Jerry’s homepage.” On Oct. 23, 2005, he uploaded his video to a Korean music site called Mule. From there an unknown fan calling himself guitar90 copied it and posted it on YouTube with the elegant intro: “this guy iz great!!!”

Repeatedly newcomers to the comments section on YouTube suggest that the desktop computer visible on the right side of the video is doing all the playing, and that funtwo is a fraud. They point out that there is a small gap in timing between the finger work and the sound of the video. These complaints invite derision from those in the know. (Funtwo’s use of a backing track is no secret, and as for the gap, he says he recorded the audio and video independently and then matched them inexacty.)

Guitar fanatics are perplexed: “How the hell does he gets his harmonics to sound like that?” Some praise specific components of the performance, including the distortion, the power chords or the “sweet outro.” Overall a consensus emerges: This guy iz great.

“I’m shocked at how much you rock,” one fan said. “Funtwo just pure ownz the world,” said another. “Somebody just beat JerryC at his own song,” tinFold44 said. Carrie34 gushed, “funtwo’s version makes me want to hold up my lighter and *hug* my inner child! :)

PACHELBEL’S CANON, at its essence, dramatizes the pleasure of repetition and imitation. It should come as no surprise, then, that JerryC and funtwo have both attracted impersonators. Over the past year, as JerryC’s and funtwo’s videos have been broadly distributed on every major video-sharing site, hundreds of other guitarists have tried their hands at JerryC’s “Canon Rock.” Many copy the original mise-en-scène: they sit on beds in what look like the bedrooms of guys who still live with their parents. They make little effort to disguise their computers. And they look down, half-hiding behind hats or locks of hair.

Some imitators have gone further than that. A Malaysian guitarist claiming erroneously to be funtwo briefly set up a MySpace page, then shut it down. And this month, in Washington, a 12-year-old classical pianist named Alfonso Candra played “Canon Rock” for a small crowd at the Indonesian Embassy. He too claimed he was the guitarist in the “guitar” video. That was untrue, but Alfonso played his heart out.

This process of influence, imitation and inspiration may bedevil the those who despair at the future of copyright but is heartening to connoisseurs of classical music. Peter Robles,
a composer who also manages classical musicians, points out that the process of online dissemination — players watching one another's videos, recording their own — multiplies the channels by which musical innovation has always circulated. Baroque music, after all, was meant to be performed and enjoyed in private rooms, at close range, where others could observe the musicians' technique. "That's how people learned how to play Bach," Mr. Robles said. "The music wasn't written down. You just picked it up from other musicians."

In this spirit, JerryC told fans on his Web site, "I don't plan to make tabs anymore. The major reason is that it takes lots of time, and I think the best way to learn music is to cover it by ear."

That educational imperative is a big part of the "Canon Rock" phenomenon. When guitarists upload their renditions, they often ask that viewers be blunt: What are they doing wrong? How can they improve? When I asked Mr. Lim the reason he didn't show his face on his video, he wrote, "Main purpose of my recording is to hear the other's suggestions about my playing." He added, "I think play is more significant than appearance. Therefore I want the others to focus on my fingering and sound. Furthermore I know I'm not that handsome."

Online guitar performances seem to carry a modesty clause, in the same way that hip-hop comes with a boast. Many of the guitarists, like Mr. Chang and Mr. Lim, exhibit a kind of anti-showmanship that seems distinctly Asian. They often praise other musicians, denigrate their own skills and talk about how much more they have to practice. Sometimes an element of flat-out abjection even enters into this act, as though the chief reason to play guitar is to be excoriated by others. As Mr. Lim said, "I am always thinking that I'm not that good player and must improve more than now."

Neoclassical guitar technique has fallen largely out of favor in American popular music. It's so demanding that many listeners conclude it has no heart and lacks the primitive charm of gut-driven punk and post-punk, which introduced minimalist sounds in a partial corrective to the bloated stylings of American heavy metal.

In the YouTube guitar videos, however, technical accomplishment itself carries a strong emotional component. Many of the new online guitarists began playing classical music — violin, piano, even clarinet — as children; they are accustomed to a highly uneven ratio of practice to praise. Mr. Lim's fans said they watch his "Canon Rock" video daily, as it inspires them to work hard. When I watch, I feel moved by Mr. Lim's virtuosity to do as he does: find beauty in the speed and accuracy that the new Internet world demands.

Even as they burst onto the scene as fully-formed guitar gods, they hang back from heavy self-promotion. Neither JerryC nor funtwo has a big recording contract.

At a moment in pop history when it seems to take a phalanx of staff — producers, stylists, promoters, handlers, agents — to make a music star, I asked Mr. Lim about the huge response to the video he had made in his bedroom. What did he make of the tens of thousands of YouTube commenters, most of whom treat him as though he's the second coming of Jimi Hendrix?

Mr. Lim wrote back quickly. "Some said my vibrato is quite sloppy," he replied. "And I agree that so these days I'm doing my best to improve my vibrato skill."

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