

Contestant: Blayke Waldrep

Overall, it stays close to the source material; it flows quite well, although in the beginning, the bassline with the 16th notes (3rd measure) took me by surprise.

The original Penelo's Theme is very upbeat, and so is this arrangement. Blayke opted to write some small variations for solo piano on that theme, but I felt he didn't tap into the full potential of neither the theme nor the instrument of choice. He could have had explored the piano's wide range of dynamics, he could have made use of the multitude of registers available, and, more importantly, his variations could be a tad more varied.

However, I really liked the jazzy section (mm26-mm35), and I wish it had been developed a bit more. In fact, there were some sections that could have been developed a bit more, or else they seem superfluous. For example, Blayke could have expanded the rhythm on mm17 and have a whole new section right there.

In a nutshell, this arrangement of Penelo was written well, it flows well (even with some surprises), but some more variation could have helped.

Score: 60/100

Contestant: Jason Mulligan (altoboy291)

This one I thoroughly enjoyed. Jason's arrangement has some very minor flaws, but the good outweighs the bad, and by far.

The only two negative comments I can make are about the bass instrument and the ending.

I can't identify through the midi if that's really a bassoon, but anyway: most of the time, it's way too loud, and that can be a bit annoying; I mean, you're trying to listen to the violin or the high winds, but the bassoon gets in your way.

As for the ending, I felt it dragged on. The piece could have ended at 2:13 and it would have been a lot better. I actually thought it ended at that point, and the only reason the midi continued to play was because of a mess up or something.

That's it. The other comments are all positive: great layering; even more upbeat than the original, but without getting obnoxiously happy (it could even be Penelo's Theme on the upcoming Revenant Wings game for the DS; after all, the characters all look like kids, and so this arrangement would fit the new Penelo like a glove); flows wonderfully; no instrument abuse (so there was no "Sakimoto'ing").

What more can I say? Fantastic.

Score: 90/100

Contestant: Josh Barron

I had never noticed how wonderful the original piece's melody was until I heard Josh's arrangement. If it wasn't for the competition, I would have probably kept ignoring it.

I felt Josh stayed true to Sakimoto, but that's not always a good thing: at times, both of them have a tendency to have passages that are so full of sounds and chords and whatnot that you just don't know what to hear. Luckily I can only think of two, maybe three times, when something like this bothered me on Josh's arrangement.

I liked his solution to that problem: on mm75-mm82, the pizzicato is awesome. It sounds great and it prevents that fullness I commented on earlier. I also liked the violin-cello dialogues (mm9, for example) a lot. It broke the monotony of piano and violin, while still being interesting.

Speaking of the piano, I'll say what I said before, when commenting on Blayke's Penelo: dynamics, registers! I know it was there mainly to accompany the strings, but still, I thought there could have been a whole section dedicated to the piano as the main instrument, with the strings accompanying it.

Overall, it was a very strong arrangement. It flows nicely, but at times it felt too long. Still, some parts of it were excellent, and I have an easier time remembering the good than the bad.

Score: 90/100

Contestant: Nick Werner

Nick's arrangement is certainly the most original of all six of them.

He did a great job turning a rather conventional (almost dull) piece into something interesting to listen to. Those tone glissandi are the best; they work very well in the arrangement, and make it sound apart from all the others.

Not only that, but the sudden changes of pace, and the "metal tapping" parts make the arrangement stand out even more. And that's good.

But it's also bad. At times I felt lost; the piece had some sections I just couldn't understand what they were doing there (like section G, for instance). I had to listen to it over and over again to figure out how he had gotten there.

Still, in the end, I believe Nick was able to write a cohesive, albeit very unconventional, arrangement. It's got musical qualities that separate it from pretty much almost everything I've heard to this day. Even though it doesn't share that many similarities with the original, it can stand on its own and be enjoyed.

Score: 95/100

Contestant: Pandemonium

First of all, let me say it takes guts to write a 10+ minute piano arrangement. It's already hard enough trying to write arrangements that are long *enough*, so imagine my surprise when I noticed Pandemonium had written a 12-minute long one!

When an arrangement is around 3-4 minutes long, it's easy to write enough interesting material to keep the listener entertained; however, on longer works, the listener can and will get upset if what he/she is listening to falls apart every now and then.

Unfortunately, wedged in with a lot of great stuff (like the beginning of the "Rebellion" theme, and subsequent development), there are a lot of not so fun sections. An arrangement of just "Rebellion" would have had a more appropriate length and enough material to cover its runtime.

Just to make one thing clear: I'm not complaining about the length *per se*, but about the ratio of sections I liked to the ones I disliked, and it looks to be a bit on the low side. Is it technically impressive? It most certainly is. But after repeated listens, it's almost a chore hearing it.

There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with how the piece progresses (some more "Rebellion" wouldn't hurt, though), and the way Pandemonium used the piano is pretty great, with those fast runs and sudden change of dynamics. Also, both themes stay true to the original pieces, so no problems there.

However, as I sad before, I felt the arrangement was too long-winded. Cut a few sections, some passages and it's good to go.

Score: 75/100

Contestant: Will Buck

Will's Penelo is musically great, and I've got no complaints. The piano, his instrument of choice, is used masterfully, exploiting dynamics just the way I like it.

The piece has interesting variations, nice rhythms, excellent flow and numerous sections of development.

However, the problem is exactly there, not in the harmony or anything. It has a lot of good sections, but not one of them truly stands out to me. I can find in every other competitor's arrangement at least one part that I consider superior to all others.

There were some *passages* I did like very much. Like for example, on mm73, the descending 8th notes. Still, brief passages won't improve the score that much.

That is the only negative comment, but unfortunately, it weighs heavily on the final grade. Everything else is top notch.

Score: 80/100