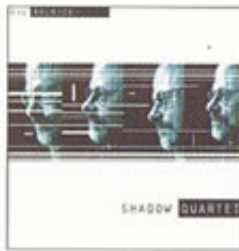


Review of SHADOW QUARTET  
Gramophone, June 2005  
by Ken Smith

**Visceral, sophisticated, electro-acoustic  
collection with a sense of humour**



Neil Rolnick's music is not so hard to perform. I mean, all you need are terrific chops, a sophisticated grasp of both advanced compositional techniques and

American roots idioms, the ability to work with electronics, and a keen sense of humor.

OK, maybe it is difficult, but it shouldn't sound like it. Fortunately the musicians gathered here all speak the same language and share a common frame of reference, which ends up turning this collection into a kind of musical block party.

The reigning post-Kronos string quartet Ethel dispenses Rolnick's *Shadow Quartet* (2003) with mechanistic precision and humanistic soulfulness. Likewise, Ethel violinist Todd Reynolds finds his groove in *Fiddle-Faddle* (2003), blending traditionally violinistic lyricism and electronic multi-tracking with a sophistication that belies the piece's junk-food title.

The more traditionally minded Quintet of the Americas find their own comfort zone in the wind sonorities of *Ambos Mundos* (2004), pulsing like Steve Reich one moment and soaring like Villa-Lobos the next. New-music diva Joan La Barbara likewise brings to *Body Work* (2004) an elegant simplicity that keeps the ear continually focused on the text (a series of biological questions taken from *Harper's* magazine).

Strangely, the only times that Rolnick seems to go on too long are the works he performs himself. *Gate Beats* (2003) wears out its welcome about two-thirds through, while *The Real Thief of Baghdad* (2003) features an anti-Bush political screed written and performed by poet Tyrone Henderson. The same tools that lend visceral immediacy to the piece's politics, though, also bring pop music's disposability. It's a rare misstep in an otherwise well cultivated collection.

**Ken Smith**