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Neil Rolnick

**Album: Shadow Quartet**

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There is something really disconcerting about hearing Joan La Barbara sing the line "Are boobs just mostly fat?" over and over again to a melody somewhat reminiscent of Steve Reich's tune for Wittgenstein's sentence "How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life" in *Proverb*. The words Neil Rolnick chooses for his 2004 composition *Body Work*, however, are not a major philosophic pronouncement but rather the first of series of questions posed by students in University of Portland professor Terry Favero's biology class published in the November 2003 edition of *Harper's Magazine*. The line is disconcerting not because it's shocking - is anything anymore?- but because it isn't. It's just a series of syllables as worthy of a melodic turn of phrase as a sonnet by Petrarch that Monteverdi would have set, the difference here being that it is surrounded by other layers featuring La Barbara's trademark vocabulary of extended vocal techniques.

This enshrining of the seemingly quotidian is a Rolnick hallmark which finds many more fascinating outlets in other works contained on this new disc as well. Infectiously catchy ditties emerge from seemingly austere cascades of single pitches in his wind quintet plus electronics *Ambos Mundos*. Idiomatic yet completely incongruous western swing invades the first movement of his string quartet *Shadow Quartet* as a memorial to his Texan father. All in all, Rolnick's music is extremely approachable yet at the same time, it makes you rethink what you're hearing, which is somehow the best of both worlds.

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