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## `Digits' blends acoustic and electronic forces

By JOSEPH DALTON Special to the Times Union

**Caption:** Teresa L. Currie NEIL ROLNICK, a prolific composer, has just released his eighth solo disc, "Digits," featuring substantial work worthy of repeated listening.

Musicians of MA'ALWYCK ANN-MARIE BARKER SCHWARTZ of the Musicians of Ma'alwyck, who just returned from a conference at Columbia University.

Imagine that you've got a cleaning rag in hand and you're dusting off the keys of a piano, pressing them down as you wipe, starting at the bass range and moving on up to the treble. Suddenly, from the random smudges of notes, bits of Stravinsky and jazz leap out at you.

That's what it felt like listening to the beginning of "Digits," a new piece by Neil Rolnick. It's the opening cut on his new CD, also titled "Digits" (Innova), that contains four major works all written during the past few years. A longtime professor of music in the arts department and iEAR Studios at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Rolnick is prolific with CD releases - this is his eighth solo disc. While his "Shadow Quartet" recording of last year assembled a collection of pieces that felt light and too obviously clever, the works on "Digits" are more substantial and worthy of repeated listening.

Some of the blur of trills and tone clusters in "Digits" come from the famous athleticism of pianist Kathleen Supove, but there's also a computer at work. That's typical of Rolnick, and all the pieces here blend electronic and acoustic forces.

The contrast between human-made and computer-made sounds is especially stark in the song cycle "Making Light of It." The vocalist is Peter Eldrige, who's voice is modest, highly personal and a bit depressive. The self-reflective poetry by Philip Levine adds to the slow moody folksiness of the vocal line. In contrast to all this is Rolnick's whirling, buzzing and glowing electronic accompaniment, which seems as if it were beamed down from a spaceship.

In "A Robert Johnson Sampler," Rolnick takes computer samples of the early blues master and stretches them out like taffy. It gets rather ghostly, as if Johnson is playing for us again through a dark veil.

Best of all is the lively "Plays Well With Others," performed by the Paul Drescher Ensemble with electronics. The title refers to the ideas of collaboration and improvisation, which are inherent in the impish and wide-ranging music. But it also speaks to the selfishness and tantrums of "Georgie" and "Dickie," two little kids in the spoken text, a political screed by Rolnick.

"Digits" is produced by Innova Recordings, the label of the American Composers Forum, located in Minneapolis. For more information visit <http://www.innovarecordings.com> or <http://www.neilrolnick.com>.

Meyer goes solo

In an interview last fall, prior to his performance with the ASO, bassist Edgar Meyer said that his next project would be a solo CD in which he not only wrote the music, but also performed it all - including the parts for piano, guitar, mandolin and gamba. He'd also be recording it himself in his new home studio, paid for by some of the funds from his 2002 MacArthur ("genius") Fellowship of \$500,000. The new self-titled disc "Edgar Meyer" (Sony Classical) is the result.

Meyer's music here is fluid, relaxed and surprisingly new age. The virtuoso playing, especially on bass, is impressive and the range of instrumental colors is nice. Taken as a whole, the disc is a remarkable accomplishment delivered in relatively short order, but listening to it gives the impression not of a brilliant man hard at work, but a regular guy taking a gentle mosey.

#### Ensemble at Columbia

Ann-Marie Barker Schwartz and the Musicians of Ma'alwayck have just returned from an appearance at the 27th Conference on New York State History at Columbia University in New York. At a dinner Friday night, Schwartz delivered a paper, "Albany's Euterpian Club: Cultivators of Musical Improvement and Taste." After her talk, the ensemble performed works drawn from some of the concerts of the Euterpian Club, which was formed in 1823 and continued until about 1827.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

#### Classical Notes

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