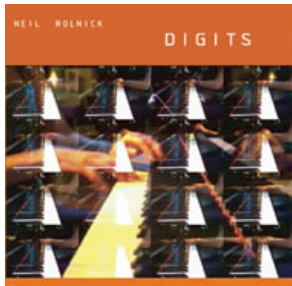


by ALLAN KOZINN

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NEIL ROLNICK: 'DIGITS'



Kathleen Supové, pianist; Peter Eldridge, vocalist; Paul Drescher Electro-Acoustic Band. Innova 656; CD.

THE four recent works by Neil Rolnick on this disc draw on the oversize gestures of Liszt's piano music, the introspective figuration of Robert Johnson's blues guitar, song forms and avant-garde theater. That's a broad expanse, but the thumbprint that runs through these scores is Mr. Rolnick's manipulation of timbre and gesture.

Much of that manipulation involves computers, but Mr. Rolnick is reluctant to give electronic sound the full spotlight. Most of his works are for live players, with Mr. Rolnick at his laptop, transforming and adding to their performances.

The title work, "Digits" (2005), is a superb example of the process. The piano writing, played with characteristic thunder and weight by Kathleen Supové, is dense and virtuosic in the best late-19th-century tradition. Mr. Rolnick lets the piano make its mark but then takes a chord, a phrase or a hammered rhythm and tinkers with it, turning it into a repeating loop that plays as the live piano moves on or recasting it in new timbres: as a string section for example.

In a song cycle, "Making Light of It" (2005), Mr. Rolnick sets Philip Levine's plain-spoken poetry to graceful melodies with a light-textured electronic keyboard accompaniment but keeps their accent ambiguous: they could be art songs or pop tunes, depending on how they're sung. Pete Eldridge, whose voice has a Tom Waits gruffness, offers the pop perspective, and there are moments when the music sounds like "Smile"-era Brian Wilson.

"A Robert Johnson Sampler" (1987, revised 2005) creates a contrapuntal fabric from fragments of Johnson's 1930's recordings, sometimes heard straight, sometimes heavily modified before computer timbres replace them entirely (at least until the blues recordings return at the end). And "Plays Well With Others" (2004) is a spirited jazz-rock ensemble piece, built around an alternately amusing and heavy-handed catalog of grievances against the Bush administration. ALLAN KOZINN