

All Music

(Major Music Guide)

[Review of *Digits*](#) (Innova 656) by Blair Sanderson



Pinning down Neil Rolnick to one identifiable musical identity is risky, since he is one of the most versatile of contemporary composers: he freely slips in and out of moods and methods, often with surprising virtuosity and wit, though without overt pastiches or parodies. Instead, the eclectic Rolnick has brought together many elements, most often borrowed from minimalism, popular music, electronics, or performance art, and fashioned them into distinctive essays that stand up quite well on their own without conforming to any single approach. Perhaps this is why *Digits* (2005), a dazzling computer-modified keyboard work performed with abundant energy by pianist Kathleen Supové, can be followed on this 2006 Innova release by *Making Light of It* (2005), a setting of Philip Levine's poetry sung with laconic mildness by Peter Eldridge against a twittering electronic accompaniment. Or why *A Robert Johnson Sampler* (1987, rev. 2005), Rolnick's quirky manipulation of taped excerpts from the blues master's recordings, can be followed by *Plays Well with Others* (2004), a tour de force in which trenchant political commentary is served up in a surrealistic sonic stew for the Paul Drescher Ensemble's Electro-Acoustic Band. Yet if Rolnick's music is understood in a larger context -- perhaps with his clever 2005 album *Shadow Quartet* -- his acute intelligence and engaging personality appear to be the true unifying forces in his work, rather than any pet theories or kitschy trademarks. The hobgoblins of consistency have no place in Rolnick's extremely varied output, and this keeps his music fresh, interesting, and vital, if not safe, predictable, or easy to pigeonhole. Innova's audio reproduction is exceptional throughout.