



photo: Paul Buckowski/Times Union

RPI celebrates composer Neil Rolnick's unique electronic music

By **JOSEPH DALTON**, Special to the Times Union

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Neil Rolnick has spent most of his career putting music and musical ideas into machines, and making them spit it back out again. But it's only in recent years that the composer and longtime Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute faculty member, who turned 60 last month, has found the unique musical voice inside himself and been able to embrace it.

"I have figured out what my music is about: material that grows organically out of little seeds and with instruments interacting with electronics, so that the electronics become magic. It's important for me to be able to hear the architecture of a piece," he said in a recent interview.

Rolnick's birthday and his music will be celebrated on Saturday evening in a concert produced by RPI's Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center in the university's Academy Hall. The program focuses on Rolnick's recent works and features a world premiere, but it also includes "Ever Livin' Rhythm," a 30-year-old piece for electronics and percussion.

FACTS: Too American Rolnick's first effort with electronics, "Rhythm" was written shortly before he moved to Paris to study at the famed IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique), the center for advanced musical research headed by composer Pierre Boulez.

Rolnick made valuable contacts during his time there, but IRCAM is a place for dense thought and denser compositions -- not such a good match for music that's as lively and playful as something called "Ever Livin' Rhythm."

"Pierre Boulez said you're too American, go back to America," recalls Rolnick, who took the advice. He later concluded: "If I'm a composer, then it's my job to write down what I hear. Why write difficult and complex stuff if that's not what I hear? I've always had a gift for melody. I used to be embarrassed by it."

As Saturday night's program will attest, Rolnick is no longer blushing at his inherent musical

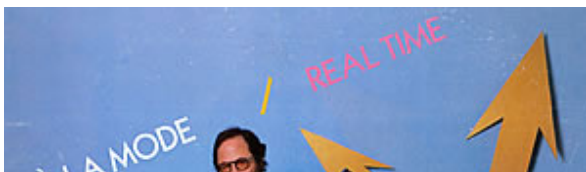




photo: Phyllis Galembo

NEIL ROLNICK came to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1981 and thought it would be a temporary gig. He's emerged as a driving force in the college's development as a center for electronic arts, and he is the one who first floated the idea of an Experimental and Media Arts Center, at [top], that's scheduled to open next fall. That's him too, on an early album cover.



gifts. Says the composer, "Whatever it is I'm meant to do, I'm doing it now."

Art-technology link

What Rolnick has also been doing for years, besides writing music, is building the arts programs at RPI. He began as a junior faculty member in January 1981, arriving in Troy, as he recalls, "with a kid, a wife, no money and a piano, which was pretty much my only possession."

"He was energetic, very smart, and very ambitious," says sculptor Larry Kagan, also a young faculty member at the time. "He saw the real possibilities of growing an arts program that relied on technology."

"I presumed it was going to be a temporary deal," Rolnick says of his early days teaching at RPI. "I'm a musician. I didn't see how I could be long term at an engineering school."

Despite such concerns, Rolnick got busy pulling together some semblance of an electronic music studio. At the time, composer Joel Chadabe was running the electronic music program at the University at Albany. He provided Rolnick with crucial advice as well as spare equipment.

"Joel told me to get anything I could working, and then ask for funding to expand it," says Rolnick.

The first major hardware was an IBM PDP 11/10, something that Chadabe no longer needed at UAlbany. "It was an old computer even then," says Rolnick, who describes it as measuring about 19 inches wide, 2 feet deep and 6 feet high. Together, the two musicians transported it across the Hudson in Rolnick's Volkswagen van.

Shortly after its installation, Rolnick put in a request to the higher-ups at RPI for an equipment upgrade. That, of course, is something he's done again and again over the years, as technology marches on. Lately though, the fact that every student owns a laptop computer has eased the pressure for ever-new equipment. "There are still things you need a studio for," explains Rolnick, "like space, microphones, and a video or sound stage."

A matter of degrees

Besides pushing for access to the latest tools, Rolnick has been a driving force in making the arts a prominent and respected part of the university. During his two nonconsecutive terms as chair of the arts department, he supervised the expansion of arts at RPI from being merely a variety of enrichment courses for students from other departments, to the offering of bachelor's and master's degrees in



"integrated electronic arts."

Rolnick remembers during his early days hearing a now-retired arts faculty member tell him, "Our job is to interest engineers in the arts enough to be future board members and supporters of arts organizations." He still groans at such a limited mindset.

Growing bored with teaching introductory-level courses only, Rolnick and his colleagues decided to seek students who would be interested in the arts as a career by offering a master's of fine arts degree. The multidisciplinary ("integrated") focus made the program unique in the nation when it was first offered in 1987.

An undergraduate program, which began nine years later, was the most successful new undergrad program in RPI's history, according to Rolnick, with an enrollment that grew from 40 to 300 in four years.

"The timing was right, at the beginning of the tech boom," he says, adding that it was a good fit for "students who play video games and have various music and graphic programs on the computers and they would say, 'Can I really made a career of that?' "

The new building

The latest manifestation of arts and technology at RPI is the prominent glass building on the hill above downtown Troy -- EMPAC, the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, a unique lavishly expensive facility scheduled to open next fall. Rolnick had a role in its genesis as well.

"The germ for EMPAC was an idea that Neil brought to me," says Faye Duchin, an RPI faculty member who was dean of the humanities and social sciences from 1996 to 2002. "I brought (the proposal) to a president's retreat with the deans, and (RPI President Shirley Jackson) loved the idea as soon as it was on the table."

Concert celebration

"Neil basically prepared the ground for EMPAC at RPI," says Johannes Goebel, director of EMPAC. "So I think it is most appropriate for EMPAC to throw a birthday party in the form of a concert."

Among the half-dozen Rolnick works on Saturday's program is "Digits," a 2005 piece for piano and electronics. Earlier this year, Anthony Tommassini of The New York Times caught a performance at the Juilliard School in New York City and described it as "an exhilarating interactive piece."

"Digits" was written for Kathleen Supove, a Brooklyn-based pianist who is known for

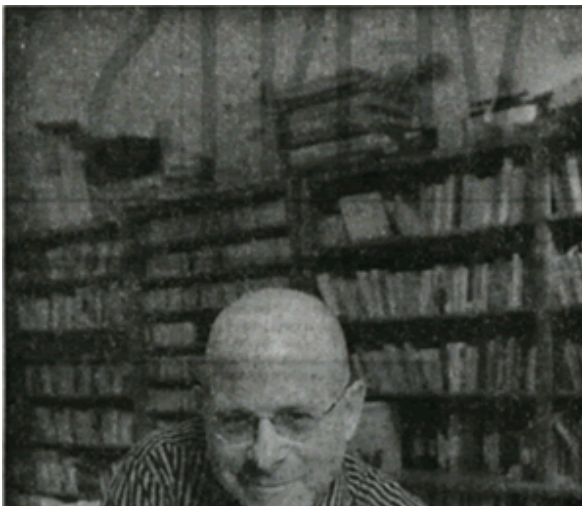




photo: Paul Buckowski/Times Union

THEN AND NOW: A few things have changed for Neil Rolnick since he began teaching at RPI in 1981 – and not just the computers he uses to make his music.

tackling the most demanding contemporary scores. Rolnick has lived in New York City since 2002. In the piece, computer programs sample and transform portions of the piano music as it unfolds live. Managing such electronic trickery is nothing new for Rolnick, which was a relief to Supove.

"I would put him at the top tier of people to work with. He knows a lot about the technology of the piece, and has made it easy for me to be able to do it," says Supove. "I've had some other pieces that are terrific, but the composer knew what he wanted but didn't have a clue how to realize it, and I had to go talk to an engineer and figure out how to set up."

Amid the virtuosity and technology, Rolnick's personality comes through.

"His music has lively tunes and rhythms, and is immediately understandable," says Chadabe.

"And it is has a very good disposition, a sunny disposition, very much like Neil himself."

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer and a regular contributor to the Times Union.

Celebrating Neil Rolnick at 60

What: A concert of mostly recent works with pianist Kathleen Supove, violinist Todd Reynolds, singers Amy Fradon (<http://amyfradon.com/>) and Leslie Ritter (<http://www.leslieandscott.com/>) and other artists.

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Academy Hall Auditorium, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute campus, Troy

Admission: Free

Info: <http://www.empac.rpi.edu> or
<http://www.neilrolnick.com/>

Also coming up: The Albany Symphony Orchestra has commissioned a new work from Rolnick, "Love Songs," which will feature vocalist Theo Bleckmann and violinist Todd Reynolds, for a special Valentine-themed concert also with music of Mozart and Schumann. 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 14, Canfield Casino, Saratoga Springs. Tickets \$23-\$46, call 465-4663; 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 15, Troy Savings Bank Music Hall, tickets \$23-\$46, call 273-0038; and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 16, Colonial Theatre, Pittsfield, Mass.; tickets \$27, call (413) 997-4444.