

Music for the modern age

By **JOSEPH DALTON**, Special to the Times Union
First published: Sunday, November 18, 2007

TROY -- The folks at RPI know more than one or two things about numbers. Longtime faculty member and composer Neil Rolnick named his recent piano piece "Digits," referring to the numerical language of computers and the 10 digits of a performer's hands.

A tour de force for soloist, electronics and video, "Digits" was a highlight of Rolnick's 60th birthday concert Saturday night at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Academy Hall Auditorium. The event was presented by the university's increasingly influential Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center.

With only five well chosen pieces and a batch of fine young performers, the concert was hardly a dutiful retrospective. "Digits," in particular, fused together old fashioned finger-crunching piano writing with the latest in electronic techniques and aesthetics. As pianist Kathleen Supove tore through the 11 minutes of twisting counterpoint, staccatoclimaxes would shoot off into electronic lives of their own.

Video cameras also watched Supove from either end of the keyboard. The unfolding images of her fingers on the keys were then fed through video programming by R. Luke DuBois, which manipulated and multiplied them in various grids and hues that shifted roughly in time with events in Rolnick's score.

Electronics were also at the heart of "Shadow Quartet," written in 2003, though the points of intersection between the string quartet and the processed sound was always ambiguous. A near constant was Rolnick's characteristic style of transparent textures and cheerful sentiments.

But Rolnick is no Pollyanna. The 1993 piece "Requiem Songs for the Victims of Nationalism" is an almost inappropriately beautiful indictment of genocide. Amy Fradon and Leslie Ritter sang about prejudice, death and loss in a variety of hearty folk styles with accompaniment from violin, percussion and keyboard. Blurry electrics often came in merely as codas to the songs, but when the women sang "Clean out the Serbs, Clean out the Croats" with toe-tapping verve, some intrusive electronic grunge became a welcome pollutant.

Looking further back, 1977's "Ever-livin' Rhythm" had David Schotzko go to town -- often with a tribal beat -- on an array of percussion instruments. The vintage sounding tape part that played along felt rather unnecessary.

Receiving its world premiere by Supove and violinist Todd Reynolds was "Hammer and Hair," which was the only piece that eschewed technology.

But the music's nonchalant wanderings through popular, classical and avant garde styles could only come from a composer who has traveled those paths with tools of the modern age.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union. MUSIC REVIEW EMPAC presents Neil Rolnick's 60th Birthday Concert When: 8 p.m. Saturday Where: Academy Hall Auditorium, RPI, Troy The crowd: A full house of at least 200, with RPI faculty and students supplemented by a range of curious listeners from the community.