

The Berkshire Eagle

His new views on love

By Clarence Fanto, Special to The Eagle

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PITTSFIELD — When the Albany Symphony's enterprising music director David Alan Miller started planning this year's Valentine's Weekend concerts, composer Neil Rolnick was an obvious

Friday, February 15

choice for a world premiere. They first collaborated in 1994 as co-founders of what was called the new "multimedia orchestra of the future," Dogs of Desire.

To fulfill his commission, Rolnick decided to compose a song cycle for two genre-defying soloists — violinist Todd Reynolds and vocalist-composer Theo Bleckmann. Drawing heavily on his personal experiences and family life, Rolnick's song cycle, traces the evolution of a long-term relationship from the first blush of romantic passion to the emotional intimacy and friendship typical of later life — all in 18 minutes.

"Love Songs" will be heard tomorrow evening at 7:30 at the Colonial Theatre when Miller conducts the Albany players on a program that also includes Schumann's Symphony No. 1, "Spring," and Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 in C, with Orion Weiss as soloist.

"I've been in a very happy marriage for 36 years but my perspective on love is very different now," Rolnick, 60, observed during a telephone interview

from his apartment in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, noting happily that his daughter and her two children live next door.

For "Love Songs," he sought out his friend and occasional collaborator, Larry Beinhart, as lyricist after abandoning the idea of using Shakespeare sonnets or traditional love songs.

Describing his song cycle as a double concerto for voice and violin, Rolnick acknowledges that some have found portions of the work "dark" but responds that "you don't get resolution unless you look back at what's been difficult.

"There's the hot, hormonal rush of finding someone and getting it on initially," he explains, "feeling your oats and then discovering someone more important than yourself.

"Then there's the elation of having a child and all the conflict that brings up, sticking together through years of children and houses and jobs, making things work, a sort of dissatisfaction with the parts of all of that, and then at some point as years have gone by, you realize your relationship with your partner is something you never even could have imagined initially."

By the fourth song, the text dwells on love as "the realization that you've built something with this other person that's something to savor and relish."

During the fifth and final song, the end of life approaches: "You come in alone and go out the same, and if you're lucky in life, love comes along. You realize that the real value of life is having loved someone."

Rolnick has a reputation for blending high-tech, electronic, computer-based composition with the

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type of accessible, melodic approach that finds favor with audiences wary of contemporary music.

He has been a major player on the Capital Region's contemporary music scene. Since 1981, he has been affiliated with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., where he was instrumental in developing iEar Studios, a program of Integrated Electronic Arts for undergraduates and graduates.

Having scaled back his teaching commitments at RPI, where he commutes twice weekly, Rolnick has been composing nearly full-time since moving to New York in 2002.

Born in Dallas, Rolnick's high-school years included a summer at the Aspen Music Festival in 1963 where he studied with the prolific, jazz-influenced French composer and educator Darius Milhaud.

Rolnick also recalls long Saturdays with the pedagogue Fritz Kramer, learning the piano and the basics of harmony and counterpoint.

While earning his degree in English literature at Harvard (class of '69), Rolnick wrote a novel and played folk, rock, blues and jazz. He moved to San Francisco, working various day jobs and performing pop music. A sojourn in Vermont as a carpenter and member of rock band was followed by acceptance at the San Francisco Conservatory as a student of composers John Adams and Andrew Imbrie.

"I spent a year catching up on music courses I had never taken," Rolnick says.

From 1977 to 1979, he worked as a researcher on a fellowship at IRCAM, Pierre Boulez's influential center for cutting-edge music experimentation in

Paris.

"It was exciting hanging around (Luciano) Berio and Boulez, it opened my eyes to really working seriously as a composer," Rolnick recalls.

"I came away with a much clearer sense of what my own aesthetic choices and proclivities were. I'm not a European modernist, my musical personality is indeed very American and that works for me very well."

In 1980, he earned his doctorate in composition at the University of California-Berkeley.

"The idea," he said, "was to get credentials so I could live out in the country and teach music someplace."

That someplace, though not exactly in the country, turned out to be RPI, where he was offered a starting teaching position in 1981.

"I had no money," he said. "I had a wife, a kid and a piano, and I didn't know how we were going to eat." So he accepted the offer, not expecting to stay long and explaining to the administration on day one that, outside of class time and staff meetings, he would be composing at home.

Within five years, he earned tenure and found himself in the midst of a vibrant, arts-oriented community, collaborating with colleagues to start the Masters of Fine Arts Program, an interdisciplinary arts program that began with graduates, and was followed a few years later by an undergraduate course that enrolled 300 students within four years of its inception.

The Electronic Media, Performing Arts and Communications program, which later this year moves into the Experimental Media and Performing

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Arts Center (EMPAC), an expensive all-glass building overlooking downtown Troy, was "the right idea at the right time," Rolnick pointed out, since it accompanied the digital revolution.

"Students had spent their high-school years playing with computer games and videos," he said. "Here was a place where they could attend an excellent school and develop a career.

"I teach classes where students are passionately engaged in serious work, producing music."

At the same time, Rolnick was gaining recognition. His compositions were being performed. There were foundation grants, international travels and more than a dozen CDs on independent labels. "I figured out the thing for me to do was not to follow musical language which insisted upon atonality and avoided any kind of pulse or beat or anything your ear could follow," he said.

"My music tries to capture something about my emotional state and inner response to the general state of things around me.

"I think of it as expressive because I'm trying to communicate what I'm feeling to you."

Though he was approached to become dean of the EMPAC program in 2002, Rolnick decided he would be selling himself and the school short by taking the position at a time when he wanted to focus on composing.

At his wife's suggestion, they sold their house in Chatham, N.Y. and relocated to New York in what he describes as "one of the great old apartment buildings, looking out over the Hudson.

"The move did exactly what I was hoping," he said. "I've been churning out music and have hit my

stride. I feel like I understand what I'm doing, and I have commissions for new works that keep me busy at least until the start of 2010."

The use of electronics is simply a means to an end, as he sees it.

"The thing that's exciting about computers is not that you can get sounds from boxes but that they connect us in ways that are otherwise unimaginable," Rolnick said.

"The music that I write is much less concerned with particular contemporary music fashions ... (and more) with trying to synthesize in my head or my heart all the various things that we come into contact with, to make something that feels coherent and direct for me.

"When I think about the use of technology, I think of it as simply another instrument, or an extension of the players' instruments."

"Love Songs" is an example.

"It's a chance to stretch out the material in the piece," he says. "To me, that's the whole idea of using technology."

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