

CLASSICAL RECORDINGS

Finding Places for Electronica, the Sacred and the Inner Child

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NEIL ROLNICK:**'The Economic Engine,' Other Works**

Music from China; Todd Reynolds String Quartet; Maya; other performers. Innova 724; CD.



NEIL ROLNICK has been a prolific and inventive composer of electronic music for the last quarter-century, but lately he has been revisiting the joys of acoustic instruments. He has not abandoned technology entirely: in the title work, scored for Western string quartet and four Chinese string instruments, comparatively light electronic processing of the eight string lines adds a ninth strand, used sparingly.

"The Economic Engine" (2008) is an idiosyncratic four-movement dialogue between antiquity and modernity, and its charm is in the blend, clash and interplay of Asian and Western timbres, gestures and textures. The Chinese instruments usually sing in their native accents (without using traditional themes) but stretch toward Western styles too, and at times the two sound worlds are juxtaposed: a keening erhu line is supported by a vibrato-rich violin.

A different kind of dialogue animates "Hammer and Hair" (2007), a 20-minute fantasy for violin and piano. Here the tensions involve modernist timbral effects (though not electronic ones), an updated Classicism (a fugal section, for example) and a freewheeling jazz style that takes over the violin and piano lines at different times. The violinist Todd Reynolds and the pianist Kathleen Supové, comfortable in all these styles, move seamlessly through the colorful episodes.

The brightly spirited "Uptown Jump" (2006), a study in rich, tactile textures and inventive variation, juxtaposes jazz moves with ragalike percussion patterns. Maya, a trio of flute, harp and percussion, plays it with grace and energy.

For perspective Mr. Rolnick has resurrected a 1987 recording of "Real Time" (1983), an amusingly quaint work for synthesizer and chamber orchestra, originally released on a Composers Recordings LP. His writing is much more fluid and assured these days.

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