

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW: NEIL ROLNICK BREAKS GROUND IN CHINA

by Mike Vernusky

"I can't imagine that many of them really knew what kind of music they were coming in to hear, but they certainly convinced me by their responses that they were eager to hear new things,"

says Rolnick when describing his audience at a recent performance in Beijing.

I first met Neil Rolnick at Visiones Sonoras 2006, where I discovered his tremendous musical voice and a warm, engaging personality. He is also great listener off-stage, taking just as much care to learn from a discussion as he does to contribute to it. After attending his talk at Visiones Sonoras 2008, *One Month and One Ear in China*, I was intrigued by his interactions in the Conservatories and musical underground of such a diametrically opposed culture, and decided to continue the discussion with him the weeks following.



Neil Rolnick (b. 1947)

Rolnick, based in New York City, is a veteran of the experimental music scene, having first explored computers and their application in music since the late 1970s. After studying with such luminaries as Darius Milhaud, John Adams, and John Chowning, emerged with a compositional palate consisting of digital samples, acoustic instruments, and interactive media. These interests have brought Neil's music to a diverse array of venues, often pulling the composer out of the audience and placing him on stage as a performer.

Neil Rolnick's music is similar to his personality, showing a comfortable and unflashy expertise with lyricism and virtuosic writing but touching on unorthodox electroacoustic elements such as melody, rhythm and even humor. Through his unconventional use of sonic materials and convergent media, he also integrates live performance, collaborative forces and improvisation to create a unique sound inspired by his interactions with various musical cultures of the world.



The Economic Engine @ DEJ08, 798 Art Area

Touching down in China:

These days, Neil is a savvy world citizen using his music as a passport. A quick glance at his resume showing travels around the globe with performances in such places as Japan, Mexico Reykjavik, Yugoslavia, and Zurich. What I found compelling about Rolnick's experience in China in particular, was his direct interaction and submersion in the fabric of a musical landscape consisting of long established conservatories and a lively musical underground. Through the course of the month he was there - this being his 2nd visit to the country - Neil was artist-in-residence at the highly competitive music conservatories in Beijing and Shanghai, but also managed to coalesce with the musicians from the underground electronic music scenes in both cities.

Rolnick, describes the challenge of dropping into a foreign culture, being forced to negotiate what it means to be an artist outside of his element, but one who also embraces these differences.

"It's easier for an outsider than an insider. Because there is less of an investment in the local culture, and you have no reputation to live up to, there is less to fear with your actions,"

says Rolnick with a grin.

Commissioned by the China Electronic Music Center at the Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM) in Beijing, Neil's piece *The Economic Engine* was written for 4 traditional Chinese instruments, string quartet (western), digital processing and video projection. During his visit, Rolnick was also scheduled for performances at the NoiShanghai series, the Beijing Modern Music Festival, and the Beijing Digital Entertainment Jam sponsored by the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology.

Perhaps mirroring the highly bureaucratic police state that is China, Neil constantly faced obstacles doing even the simplest of tasks when preparing for performances. He talks at length about the tedium involved:

"For the first workshop of The Economic Engine in Beijing, I had set up with the performers and a technical assistant to have a room for rehearsals on an agreed-upon schedule. I gave the list of equipment I needed and everything seemed fine, including the 9 music stands needed. When I arrived, the first several players were out of town, apparently having forgotten the commitment to do the workshops."

"They were back the next day, and when I met with the assistant to set up for the rehearsal, we went through the list of equipment and got stuck on the music stands. I was told there were no music stands. I said that's impossible. This is the Chinese Central Conservatory of Music. There must be thousands of music stands here. No, I was told, this was the electroacoustic department of the conservatory. They never needed music stands, so there were none here."

"I suggested we get them from the performance department. I was told that this was impossible because the Technical Assistant was a student, and there would need to be a faculty or administrator to ask for the signature to request the loan of music stands from another department. Plus, it was a weekend and therefore there was no one there to get the signature from. This went on for a long time, maybe an hour or so, while we set up chairs and microphones, etc."

"Finally, in exasperation, I looked around the studio and found a bunch of suspicious looking unopened boxes stacked in a corner which looked like they might contain music stands. Much to the dismay of the Technical Assistant, I started opening the boxes, which did, indeed, contain music stands. I was able to unearth my nine music stands, but he was very concerned throughout that I would do such a thing."

Getting more directly involved with the Conservatory and its students, Neil led workshops, gave lectures, and conducted master classes. Perhaps not surprisingly, the level of performance ability in the student body was exceptional. After all, these were the most gifted of the gifted students in a country with a population of over 1.3 billion people. But when asked about the style of new music being written at the conservatories, Rolnick describes the students as... well, conservative:

"People in the conservatory were writing music that their teachers wanted to hear. There wasn't a sense of discovery or innate sense of sound. When put in orthodoxy, it became more about doing something 'right' and less of a creative pursuit. In the end, their new music sounded not new, but...old."

This raises an important issue. If the most prestigious conservatory in one of the most populated cities in the world is producing composers without a salient identity, one can't help but wonder if it's possible for such a system to produce a uniquely innovative musical voice that will stand out in the 21st century.

"There is a certain level of achievement and power for the professors having gotten where they are. Human nature is to fall into a mentality of 'You've done it right, and if your students can do what you did, they've done it right too.' This is how tenure gets to be problematic."

Rolnick adds,

"I think it's a really interesting conundrum they've found themselves in: musical education vs. artistic education. People at the conservatories were uniformly talented and well-trained in terms of skillful use of the tools, yet their focus was on accomplishing tasks and assignments, not on finding and growing their individual musical and artistic voices."

In One Ear, Out the Other

One of the most striking aspects of Neil's visit to China was the sudden and seemingly permanent loss of hearing in his left ear. After being diagnosed with an approximate loss of 70db in this ear, many composers might not have the courage to continue writing, recording, and releasing music. Rolnick, on the other hand has pursued every possible avenue to recovery - from homeopathic doctors to acupuncturists to diuretics - all to no avail. So at the end of the day, how does a working composer adjust to musical life with only one fully functional ear?

"This trip was the first time I had to deal with this limitation in the context of rehearsals for a new work and a series of major performances. Even in preparing for the premiere of The Economic Engine,

I was very aware of new limitations I had to deal with: making sounds which I want to hear, but on some level can't hear. Issues like making sure that the use of stereo is interesting, and that the mix of live and processed sound is effective became major challenges."

"On this trip I was essentially on my own, so I had to do all the details of sound processing and distribution in performance. After the first performance I was able to hear a recording made of the show, and was quite upset by what I heard. Since I can no longer hear the location of sound, I was unable to distinguish live sound coming directly from the instruments from amplified sound coming out of the speakers. The result was that the mix was a mess. The instruments which were sitting nearest to me were almost inaudible in the recording because I'd brought their levels down, and the instruments sitting farthest from me were way too loud in the mix. So I need to have someone who knows my music, who can read the score and understand the technology, and who can then follow and realize the sounds from my descriptions."

*"The real test on this was the CD recording of *The Economic Engine* and two other new pieces. I worked on this with Jody Elff, who has now engineered and edited my last three CDs. While I can't hear the result in stereo, I can hear it all in mono, and all the balances and timbral aspects of the sound is really what I was after. And Jody and I worked so meticulously with the stereo placement, along with all other aspects of the mix, that I feel confident that even that aspect of the recording is as I wanted, even if I can't check on it myself."*

Since returning to the States, Neil has yet to miss a beat - having revised, completed, and recorded *The Economic Engine*, which should be released on Innova Recordings in April 2009.

"I'm lucky that there are a number of people in the NYC area I can rely on for this kind of thing. It's a little humbling to explain that I can't hear whether or not the actual sound is what I want, but it's empowering to be able to explain specifically enough to be sure that the sound is realized."

Ear to the Ground: Outside of the Conservatory

Like most major cities in the world, Beijing and Shanghai have multiple music scenes and cultures happening at the same time. In cities like Amsterdam or New York, it's not uncommon to find musicians who frequent multiple scenes: those who walk the line between the so-called academic circles and the so-called vernacular; a bassist for example,

rehearsing with the local symphony by day, who sits in at a jazz club by night.

When asked about this overlapping culture in China, Rolnick speaks of a lacking cross-pollination between the academic circles and those on the outer perimeter.

"I was really amazed that the people in the conservatory have no idea about musicians in the clubs, and vice versa. One of the teachers was very interested and even apologized for not being able to attend. So I came away with a real sense that these worlds need to be brought together. They have so much to learn from each other...even if what they learn is to react against each others' aesthetics in more specific and well thought-out ways."



Cindy Ng Sio Leng performing video with Neil Rolnick at DEJ08 (Digital Entertainment Jam) at 798 Art Area, Beijing

Those who don't pursue academic studies in music find alternative venues to refine their art, often utilizing the smallest of bars, public spaces or even abandoned factories to perform for an audience. One of Rolnick's performances was held in the latter, known as 798 Art Area:

"I think it was a derelict dormitory for an old factory, up four floors of stairs with broken and chipped tiles on the stairs, an inch of dust and grit on every surface and clear views into long disused communal bathrooms at each landing."

He goes on to describe the attitude of the music making in the underground.

"The young people who created electronic music outside the academy were incredibly excited about what they were doing, and for the most part were self-taught or unschooled in either music or music technology. Their entire focus was on self-expression and finding their musical voice, and they were pushing limits in whatever direction they went. This kind of energy is what you need to make music continue to be fresh."

Rolnick continues,

"I heard a performer making acoustical sounds, using very tiny objects for percussion. He had a guzheng that he had contact mics on, and he strummed it really hard so that the zithers came popping off one by one, eventually using his mouth on the instrument like oral sex."



Guzheng deconstruction performance at NoiSHANGHAI

Always having a youthful exuberance for discovery, Neil tells of his experience in Beijing about a band called *Torturing Nurse*.

"They were the local favorites, everyone loved them. They were in their late 20s and early 30s and did a lot of playing to a dedicated following. They were really passionate about what they were doing."

Torturing Nurse is not your everyday rock band. Using only stompboxes, modulated feedback and noise, two young men play feedback-driven pedals while a female singer screams non-stop with the aid of theatrics and costuming. "There was a deep level of engagement and commitment by the performers," explains Rolnick.

"Sometimes the singer was joined by Junky, one of the stomp box players while Xu Cheng, the other stompbox player, filled the room with sounds which were driving but somehow devoid of beat or regularity. They created a lot of movement."

How does it communicate, one might ask? "It's very, very loud," says Rolnick.



Torturing Nurse @ Live Bar

Neil goes on:

"There was also an interesting interchange with two of the young composers in the NoiSHANGHAI group. At dinner the first night I was there, Wang Changun, whom I'd met on a previous trip, was very interested to hear about technical aspects of making computer music in the 1970s. His friend, one the members of Torturing Nurse, was adamant about not caring about the past or how things were done before. Very punk rock attitude."

"What was interesting was that this all turned into a discussion of the value, or lack of value, of learning about the history of what we do. It eventually moved into a discussion of why neither of them wanted to have anything to do with academic music establishment, and why they both insisted that they were more free to be experimental musically because they didn't depend on music or on academia to earn their livings. Instead, both worked in the tech sector in a variety of ways, and kept their musical lives free of the pressure to succeed economically or academically."

"While I don't agree with this stance, I do think it's a great place to start a life dedicated to music because it makes clear that the commitment is to music. From there, there are lots of paths to learn more about both music and how technology can work with it -- either in the academy or not, as your main source of income or not. While I don't think anyone changed anyone else's mind, it was one of the most engaged and animated discussions I heard of aesthetic and historical issues while I was there."

Out of curiosity, I asked Neil if he had any peculiar moments with other artists during his trip.

"At one point, visiting an artist village outside of Beijing, one of the artists I was eating dinner with couldn't get over the fact that I was about the same age as his grandfather. Somehow, this developed into a very serious challenge to arm-wrestle. We ended up in a fairly extended tussle, but eventually this 20-something year old painter was able to beat me in arm wrestling. I'm not sure what that was supposed to show, but it resulted in big grins all around, and somehow seemed to assure him that I was OK."

Microcosm, Macrocosm

"It's hard for me to imagine that there won't eventually be some kind of crossover between the different musical worlds I observed on this trip,"

says Rolnick about the split between academic and non-academic music/technology practices in China.

"The responses seemed very positive from the audiences, both at the Conservatory and at the 798 Art Area, even though the audiences and venues seemed quite distinct. The young players, particularly the traditional instrument players, were very intent upon getting the work right, and played with real commitment," he elaborates. "And while they seemed very enthusiastic, it's hard for me to read whether that was a reaction to my music, or just to the novelty of working with an American composer."

Despite the disparities between opposing cultures, one begins to wonder what really is possible when these lines are blurred. How can a composer, regardless of his/her 'academic or underground' nametag, benefit from the alienation of familiar surroundings by being submerged in that of a foreign musical soil?

Says Rolnick,

"I've been trying to find a way to bring Yan Jun, the major producer of non-academic experimental music and most active impresario of experimental sound in Beijing, to the U.S. to experience the kind of complex mix of high level skills and disparate aesthetic positions which are manifested in the New York new music scene."

Neil continues,

"I would love for him to spend some time here. My sense is that this could have a significant impact on the scene in Beijing."

Perhaps a role reversal is appropriate here. What if the underground musicians had access to the facilities that enable new pathways to expression, and the conservatory musicians had the time and freedom to explore other musics? How would an underground composer from China respond to the academic circles of a major artistic city or other musical haven in the US? Taking this a few steps further, how about a pedigree composer from a Chinese Conservatory immersed in the musical underground of New York City. What collaborations or cultural exchanges lie beyond these divisions? What would this sound like? Could this be the future of Chinese music in the 21st century? Could this ever become a reality?

In a country where an abandoned factory can house a new music concert, an arm-wrestling match can make a new friend, and the underground is producing music entrepreneurs as fast as the conservatories are producing virtuosos, it seems that anything is possible.

Links _____

Neil Rolnick

www.neilrolnick.com

<http://www.neilrolnick.com/hearingblog>

http://www.arts-electric.org/stories/080818_rolnick.html

Torturing Nurse

<http://www.myspace.com/torturingnurse>

Jody Elff

<http://elff.net/>

Subjam Records

<http://www.subjam.org/>

Innova Recordings:

<http://www.innova.mu>

Select Discography _____

Digits (2006) (Innova Records 656)

Shadow Quartet (2005) (Innova Records 631)

Fish Love That (2002)

(Deep Listening Records DL 18-2002CD)

Requiem Songs: for the victims of nationalism (1996)

(Albany Records Troy188)

Transforms: The Nerve Event Project

(includes NerveUs) (1993) (Cuneiform 55011)

Macedonian Air Drumming (1992)

(Bridge Records BCD9030)

ElectriCity (1992) (OO Discs #8)