

Neil Rolnick: *The Economic Engine*

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As we cruise into 2009, talking about the end of genre divisions may be a yawn, but finding artists truly blending their influences with supreme confidence and tact can still be a challenge.

Emerging from the pile wearing the stamp of successful integration is Neil Rolnick with his new release *The Economic Engine*. To open the disc, Rolnick takes that often-plowed stock pairing of "East Meets West" and makes it all meld on his own terms. His efforts are impressively aided by the talents of Music From China and The Todd Reynolds String Quartet along with a healthy dose of electronic processing, but the honest and immediate feel of the work is likely rooted in the fact that though the timbres may be adopted, the language used doesn't feel newly learned. The piece was born out of a personal response to his own trips to China and his reaction to how the nation's economic growth is impacting the country, and the energy it contains—whether chaotic or joyful or menacing, or a bit of all that—bleeds through the speakers. Sonic tourism at its most insightful.

The disc's next two works are not cross-culture projects, and in fact *Hammer & Hair* is a straight-up duet between violinist Todd Reynolds and pianist Kathleen Supové without a bit of electronic equipment in sight. Still, with a little extended technique here and a hint of jazz there, etc., Rolnick doesn't hold tightly to the creed of any particular style apart from his own which keeps thing cohesive. Weighing in at 20 minutes, it's a hefty offering, but it's pastiche without any need for nose wrinkling.

Wearing its levity on its sleeve (or rather in its liner notes), *Uptown Jump* for flute, harp, and percussion is a self-declared "party piece," here performed by the ensemble MAYA. Whimsical might be a more apt characterization, however, for though Rolnick is ostensibly chronicling a move by his daughter's family from Brooklyn to upper Manhattan inside this 12-minute work, you couldn't be faulted for imagining a setting of any nature; after all, breezy flute, lazy percussion, and meditative harp melodies could just as easily suggest a little soirée at Julius Caesar's house if you have the right palm plant and ostrich fan on hand. In all of the above cases, Rolnick's work offers plenty to praise in terms of technical craft, but its soul lives and breathes on the depth of emotion he conveys.

Wrapping up the disc is a flashback from 1983, *Real Time*, which pits a large chamber ensemble against a Synclavier II. The timbres date the piece too much to let it stand on equal terms with the rest of the disc, but it makes for satisfying listening if only to offer a glimpse of the terrain Rolnick has traveled to get where he is today.



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