

Composer keys in on electronics, but string quartet steals the show

By **PRISCILLA MCLEAN**, Special to the Times Union
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TROY -- Composer Neil Rolnick with laptop computer on stage, the ETHEL string quartet, and Bob Gluck, pianist, presented a most unusual concert Tuesday night at the Concert Hall at EMPAC.

The concert began with Rolnick, alone on stage with his computer, describing how he lost hearing in his left ear. While saying this, he used electronics to distort his words as they repeated, set to eerily bouncy rollicking tunes, simultaneously creating irony and pathos in this dark piece entitled "Mono."

"Shadow Quartet" featured ETHEL, young virtuosic string players with a sound that is best fitted for blues and Appalachian dance music, which just happened to be the style of this piece, and they performed well and enthusiastically. As they played, pieces of their music came back as "shadow" sounds through the computer, creating clicking short rhythms and filigree around the quartet.

A tribute to Rolnick's dying father, this music was alternately buoyant and poignant, and very appealing.

"Faith," the third piece, was performed by Bob Gluck, a composer himself, who gave an outstanding performance of this complicated and difficult work. Equally difficult were the electronics mimicking the piano, with many different settings, making the piano at times sound like a roomful of pianos, or a piano with strange twisted notes, or a murmur of meandering sounds around the piano, performed by Rolnick at his computer.

Although the performance was strong, the piece suffered from constantly changing styles, too little consistency and overlong timing.

The strongest piece on the program and, indeed, one of Rolnick's best works, was the last, "Extended Family."

This string quartet with no electronics had all the makings of a great classical piece, with five distinct movements, each well crafted yet with original musical ideas, soulful melodies (movement two), sweet yet complex harmonies, syncopated dance rhythms and intricate but clear structure.

The quartet performed the work beautifully, but with a rougher tone than usually heard in the classical style.

If Neil Rolnick can produce such fine work with only one working ear, then adversity has fortunately set well with him, and the audience is the happy benefactor.

Priscilla McLean is a freelance writer and composer/performer.

Concert review

Neil Rolnick: "Extended Family"

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: EMPAC, RPI, Troy

Length: 90 minutes, no intermission