# Urban Modes

Music and Life in New York

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## 08/31: Two world premieres...

Category: General  Posted by: neil

... coming up this Friday at Lafayette College in Easton, PA.

*Chthonic Dances, Part 1* by Rick Baitz

*Extended Family* by Neil Rolnick

Come join ETHEL if you're in the area!

## 08/18: Composer Interview #3: Neil Rolnick

Category: General  Posted by: neil

Drawing by Steve Brodner


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ETHEL is currently in the process of learning and rehearsing a wonderful new piece by Neil Rolnick, entitled *Extended Family.* We'll be premiering it in a few weeks, so I thought it would be interesting to interview Neil about his process and his new quartet.

**Dufallo:** Who are a few of your biggest musical influences?

**Rolnick**: I usually hate to answer this question, but I'll try to say something ... I go from being a musical glutton, when I'm hungry to hear everything and anything, to being a musical anorectic, when I don't want to hear anything, but just focus on what I'm writing. And since I've been kept busy writing fairly constantly for the last few years ... that's where I've been a lot. However, I think the music that has had one kind of big impact on me is music which I hear as giving permission for me, as a composer, to write what I hear, without worrying about what's "acceptable" in new music. And for me, that's meant being able to indulge my love of accessible melodies, beautiful harmonies, and earworms which stick with you when the music is over. At the same time, the kind of *Glass Bead Game* architectural and structural aspects of music fascinate me when they're made audible, and are another part of what I hear when I listen. And in the time & timbre-warped world of electronics and computers, the ways in which technology can add a kind of unique magic to recognizable instruments, voices and recorded sound is an enduring passion.

Probably first of those permission-granting musical experiences was Peter Maxwell Davies's *8 Songs for a Mad King*, which I heard in grad school, and which had the immediate effect of giving me permission to never write 12-tone or atonal music ever again. Early exposure to Steve Reich & Philip Glass had a similar effect, with permission to write the groove I'd always heard. Bela Bartok's work, and its engagement with Hungarian folk music gives another kind of permission: the permission to glean inspiration from the diversity of the world's musical discourse. As I've been lucky enough to travel all over the world, I've often tried to understand the different musical cultures I've encountered ... at times have been fascinated (in musical glutton mode) with music of Africa, of Japan, of SE Asia, of Latin America, of China, of the Balkan peninsula ... and of course by various kinds of pop music, blues, jazz. Another kind of permission-granting came from some of Stockhausen's tape pieces like *Hymnen*, which opened up the idea of using recognizable samples of sound which bring their context with them. And then how can I leave out downeast fiddling, which gives permission to be very simple amid elegant virtuosity.

Oh well, you can see why I don't like to answer this question. And I've left off Stravinsky, and Robert Johnson, and Gershwin, and the BaBenzele Pygmies and my teacher Darius Milhaud, and the New Lost City Ramblers and Ives and Leadbelly and Beni More. The list goes on and on ... but I won't. There's no way I can narrow it down to a few influences. With the progression from radio, to records, to CDs, to iPods and internet, we carry the whole world in our ears. The concept of just a few influences seems somehow anachronistic. So 20th Century.

**Dufallo:** Your compositions all have very strong and imaginative concepts behind them. Can you discuss your creative process – what usually comes to you first (a thought, a feeling, a musical motive, a concept) and how do you then develop and nurture that first insight?

**Rolnick:** Creative process. There are usually at least two or three projects that I'm thinking about, beyond what I'm actually working on. And when ideas are

in that preliminary phase, they usually include some combination of emotional or abstract concepts and some musical ideas which seem to me to embody the concept. When I was initially thinking about *Extended Family*, there were really two non-musical concepts floating around. One was that, having worked with ETHEL before, I had the sense of the interaction of the string quartet as being something like an extended family. The idea that this constant chamber music configuration, with the same players working together closely over a long period of time, develops its own kind of family dynamic. The other concept, and what really turned out to trump the initial idea, was to focus on my own living situation, where my daughter and her family moved into our coop in northern Manhattan, and I found myself in the center of a literal extended family, with 3 generations seeing each other and interacting daily. This was particularly fascinating, since when my wife and I moved to New York in 2002, we really thought of ourselves as having moved beyond the point in our lives when having young children around was part of our daily experience. We were going to be a middle aged couple working and playing in the big city.

Just about the time I started working on the piece, taking some of the conceptual ideas and trying to find ways to use them to shape the musical ideas and sounds I was imagining, my mother became ill with a cancer that eventually killed her. That was about 6 or 7 months of reaching out to another whole kind of extended family: spending large periods of time with my mother, and with my siblings and their children and grandchildren. And because my mother had enough time to put her affairs in order, there were a number of occasions when I found myself with 4 generations, from my mother down to my grandchildren, coordinating travel and planning for care and doing our best to support my mother and each other in the midst of all the craziness which comes with these kinds of high tension situations. Oh yes, and did I mention that my daughter next door was also pregnant with her third kid, and was having a difficult pregnancy? So there was tension about whether to risk the pregnancy or miss her final chances to see her grandmother. (She made several final visits, and the pregnancy ended with a beautiful baby boy.)

So, my sense of an extended family had grown from a kind of abstract idea, to a very visceral feeling of working through difficult times with people you've been connected to forever, or people who are connected to people you've been connected to forever. And with issues of death and new life ever present, there was also a kind of wonder at how this organism exists and continues and morphs over time. In a way, I think of an extended family both as a snapshot of people at a moment in time, and as an endless line of ever changing relationships, with entrances and exits extending from an ancient past to a distant future.

The piece then began to take shape as trying to form a trajectory through the evolution of an extended family. The first movement would depict progenitors, the first parents of the line. The second movement would represent their children, somehow related and growing out of the combined materials of their parents. But part of what makes a family extended is the fact that as children take spouses, influences from other families are brought in, their genes added to the pool, and their backgrounds influence and become part of the family. This became my idea for the third movement.

At about this point in writing the piece, my mother died. I was there with her, and stayed around for a memorial gathering for family and friends. As she wanted, the gathering was more a celebration of who she was, and a recognition that the family continues despite her loss. The idea of loss and of the persistence of life, with the inclusion of young children and a new birth

pending, became the focus of the final two movements. Families include bad times and good times, and their strength and beauty is in their persistence.

**Dufallo:** In your performance note to us, you mentioned that you have become interested in the idea of "musical DNA." Can you describe how this idea manifests itself in *Extended Family*?

**Rolnick:** Musical DNA. Now we get from the emotional idea to the nitty gritty of how the music works. A family starts with children, who combine the DNA of their parents. Then the children become parents, and they pass their mixture of DNA, along with that of their mate, to the next generation. So to represent this musically, I started out the first movement with two starkly contrasting themes which combine to make something new. I think of the opening theme as a kind of hyper energetic young person who encounters someone he or she is willing to adapt themselves to. Without losing its identity, the opening theme becomes a counterpoint to the more lyrical second idea.

With those two thematic ideas worked out, I went through a process of evolving my materials. I'd sit down every day and write variations on my initial ideas, then variations on the variations. I eventually ended up with about 40 "offspring" of each of the original ideas, and started to do the same process with combining parts of the ideas together, then generating material out of that. And then in order to have some outside influences for the "cousins & uncles & aunts" of the third movement, I developed more musical ideas, and played with ways to combine them with my "familial" musical DNA.

I should make clear that none of this is done with algorithms or formal generative processes. What's interesting to me is the idea of a family growing and evolving through recombinations of genes and occasional mutations -- that is, through generations of parents and children. While nature is able to do this with the kinds of chemical algorithms in DNA, it takes a deeper understanding than I've got to map abstract data like note names or intervals or rhythmic choices to aurally or musically meaningful changes in musical materials. To really make this something which is audible, it's much easier for me to do this with my ear than with an algorithm, or with any kind of automated process. Hidden and abstract structures and processes hold very little interest for me. I'm not very interested in randomly mutating data. I want the musicians and the audience to hear how one idea grows into another – and that seems to work best if I just write it that way. I think a listener is much more likely to hear what I hear, rather than a process I program. I'm more interested in reflecting nature's effect, rather than making a crude attempt to imitate her method.

So, after a while, I had many many pages of ideas developed from my two initial musical themes. As in any family, the offspring can vary greatly, some look and act more like one parent or the other, and some just seem to have dropped in from nowhere, though if you look closely you can see the family resemblance. With this material in hand, it was fairly straightforward to go through the conceptual ideas I had about each of the movements and put them together to make the piece. In fact, after a few months of sitting down every day and generating new musical ideas out of whatever I was working on the day before, without any thought about how I would eventually use the material, or even IF I would use it, the actual composition was easy. I knew the material so well, and had thought about it all in so many ways, that writing the individual movements happened pretty intuitively.

**Dufallo:** You are well known as a pioneer in the use of computers in performance. Extended Family, however, calls for no electronics – only the four instruments of a string quartet. Why?

**Rolnick:** I don't have any desire to stop writing for computers, or to stop using computers in performance. In fact, as I write these notes, I'm very much involved in working on a new solo piece for laptop, which I'll be performing in New York and in China in a couple of months. However, I sometimes feel trapped by my history of using the computer as part of my performance repertoire. And I guess I don't see a boundary between "computer music" and "music." I feel like my use of computers is always about making a musical point, not a technological one. The computer is the instrument I have a level of virtuosity with, but that shouldn't limit me to just writing pieces which include the computer.

Thinking about the music itself in *Extended Family*, there are ways in which I might have imagined integrating computer processing into the piece, but it felt like all of the conceptual planning was about relationships between people. So, as I moved through the process of recombining my musical DNA and imagining the piece's shape, it seemed like there was plenty of material to work with in the string quartet alone, without the addition of a computer part. I found it a sort of relief to be writing only for people playing instruments, with no need to think of new and relevant ways to make the computer an integral part of the ensemble. Sometimes people and their instruments are all the technology you need.

**Dufallo:** Do you have any advice for young composers?

**Rolnick:** I've been teaching for nearly 30 years, so I've had lots of opportunity to give advice to young composers and other artists. And I guess the advice always boils down to a couple of ideas. First, the only reason to do this is because you love it, and because you really couldn't live with yourself if you didn't do it. So generally, if someone asks me if they should be a composer, I tell them no. If it's the right path for them, they'll ignore me and do it anyway. And for the most part, young people who are driven to become composers don't bother to ask, because they don't feel like they've got a choice. The second bit of advice is that the world isn't crying out for more composers of experimental or classical music, so it's not very realistic to expect an easy path to being able to support yourself at it. People find lots of different paths, and if you're lucky you find something which pays you for activities which are closely related to composing ... like performing, or teaching, or curating, or running an arts or performing organization. But each of those paths can also take all the time and energy you intended to put into composing, leaving you after a number of years feeling like composing is something you meant to do, but didn't have time. We all have to find a way to support ourselves, but if you want to be a composer, you need to make space in your life for that in good times and bad. No one gives you that time, you need to take it.

Two quick final anecdotes: When I was 16 and 19 yrs old, I had to good fortune to know two older artists. At 16 I studied with Darius Milhaud at Aspen, when he was 77 yrs old, and had been in a wheel chair with arthritis for something like 30 years. Despite his physical challenges, it was clear that he was energized every day by making music, thinking about music and teaching young people how to create music. His infirmities disappeared when he challenged me to really engage with the music I was trying to write. At 19 I worked as a gardener for Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus. Gropius was 86, and was still working part time at his architecture firm in Cambridge. He was thoroughly engaged with contemporary art and music, and we had

lengthy arguments about parallels between America in 1966 and Germany between the World Wars. What I learned from both Milhaud and Gropius was that a life in music and the arts is a journey that can keep you engaged with your work and your world until the very end. That's something worth working for.

Second anecdote: I've been lucky in that my academic job has always permitted and even encouraged me to spend a significant part of my time writing and performing. So even though I've been teaching for a long time, there's never been a period when I haven't been actively writing and creating music and various media performances. However, for a period through the 1990s a lot of my time was given over to leading in the creation of new undergraduate and graduate programs in electronic arts at Rensselaer, where I teach. In 2002 I came to a point where continuing to administer the programs I'd worked so hard to establish would have eaten away at my focus on my writing and performing. At that point a graduate student said to me "creating this program is the most important thing you've done." It was meant as a compliment, but I heard it as a big warning. I stopped my administrative work at the school, moved to New York City where I can continue to teach, but can't be called in for endless meetings, and reshaped my time to make composing and performance an even bigger part of my life. I was about 55 at the time, and thought a lot about my lessons taken from Milhaud and Gropius. None of us knows how long we'll be around, but I feel confident that I'll be engaged in making new work until the end. Whatever compromises and adjustments we need to make along the way are worthwhile if we keep that goal in mind. Music and art are necessary, they connect us, they heal us, and they define our culture. And while there's no one ready-made career path for a composer, I do feel that for young people with the commitment and the ambition and the talent to pursue it, there's always a way to make a life as an artist. And the pay off is what I saw in my two mentors from my teen years: a life that feels full, and work that keeps you engaged creatively as long as you live.

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